The Adventures Of His Royal Highness

Nawab Rangile

Story and Illustrations

AABID SURTI

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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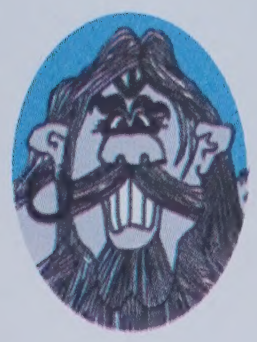

OPERATION BLACK BEARD

He was indeed the great Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile, even though he had never stepped on a battlefield, nor displayed any valour. His kingdom of Nagadapur was merged with India at the time of the Partition in 1947. Within a few years the crown and the throne too were sold. But the village folks and elders who survived respected him...and there was a reason for that.

It is true the Nawab was their monarch at one point of time. But for how many days? Well, that's a mystery. Some people say that he ruled for a week. Others believed it was only for six days. In fact, the day he was crowned, India became independent and the days of Nawabs and Maharajas became history.

With time, not only did the princely lifestyle fade away, but the world around the Nawab turned topsy-turvy. Today, the great Nawab Rangile lives in a modest house with his wife Begum Rangili and does odd jobs like selling eggs and catching crooks. But he is not unhappy with life. Even today he walks with his chest puffed-up and a sword dangling from his waist.

One day, with a *paan* stuffed in his mouth, he was sitting under a tree narrating the story of his tiger-hunt to a group of children. "With a sword in my hand I chased the man-eater like a bullet. Sometimes I was ahead of him, sometimes he was ahead of me..."

"Then what happened, Nawab Saab?" a child asked excitedly.

"How dare the tiger defeat me? I ran so fast, sooooo fast that after an hour when I turned my head, the beast was no where to be seen!"

The children broke out laughing. Before the laughter died down Nawab Rangile's friend Sher Singh appeared. Seeing his long face, Nawab Rangile asked, "What's wrong Shera? Hope the sky has not fallen on you."

"Of course it has."

"What!!!"

"Last night my house was burgled."

"Really?"

"Bandit Bhootnath has robbed my house clean and vanished."

Nawab Rangile spat out a jet of red liquid, twisted his royal moustache and asked, "Then why did you not wake me up?"

"How could I? It was only when I woke up in the morning that I realised the loss." Sher Singh cried. "In fact the bandit has plundered three more houses in the village!"

"What else can you expect from a village where a flock of cowards live?"

"True. But we do have a Braveheart amongst us."

"Indeed…that's me!"

"And that's why…" Sher Singh came to the point, "Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* has chosen you to go into the forest and catch Bhootnath."

Nawab Rangile felt as if he had been hit by a bolt from the sky.

For, at the mention of the bandit's name, not only the village folks, even the tree-leaves trembled with fear. Somehow Nawab Rangile managed to keep up a bold front and say, "Who else could dare to enter that ghastly forest? I'll march into it tonight and bring that dog, dragging by his tail, to the village square before dawn."

"That's the spirit… I did not…"

"What did you say?"

"I mean… that is exactly what I expected from you." Sher Singh continued, "the *mukhia* has announced a fabulous prize of rupees ten thousand to anyone who brings that crook to justice, dead or alive."

Wow!

Nawab Rangile closed his eyes and saw the clouds bursting with crisp, green, bank notes. Notes in the sky, notes in the air, notes everywhere. Listening to the sweet melody of rustling notes he reached home. Then the truth descended on him like a huge rock and his face sank. And what

was the truth?

The truth was the face of the bandit Bhootnath—big bulging eyes, frightening moustache, thick black beard and a wrestler's body. The truth alas, was, that no one had ever seen Bhootnath in person.

Begum Rangili, his wife could not bear the sight of her jolly husband looking so dismal. She said, "Hai Allah, you left the house with a smile on your lips and returned with funeral in your eyes. What is the matter?"

"Real bad news."

"But what?"

"Bandit Bhootnath..."

"Is he dead?"

"Oh no, he is very much alive but I am as good as dead."

Begum Rangili knew her husband too well. She correctly guessed, 'He must have accepted the challenge to capture Bhootnath and now was cursing himself for his blunder.'

"Ah..." she said at last, "So my valiant soldier is all set to launch Operation Black Beard."

"You think you have married an idiot?" Nawab Rangile said, hurt. "That rat of a bandit has done no harm to us, has he? Probably, he has realised, this house is invincible. That is why he has never dared to touch us. OK?"

"But will you go into the forest or..."

"Still plenty of time till sun set."

The sun set. Night descended and the darkness thickened. The Nawab's heartbeats became louder, breathing heavier. It was time to leave for the jungle. His heart started beating wildly like a war drum. Finally with great effort he got up, looked around sheepishly and quietly slipped under the bed.

"Listen Begum," he whispered, crouching further back. "If any one comes looking for me, please tell him, I am not at home."

"But you are very much at home."

"And if Shera comes to fetch me, tell him I have already left for the battlefield, fully armed."

But before he could finish instructing Begum, Sher Singh had already arrived and was listening quietly from the door. "It seems some village

folks have misguided you, Nawab Saab," he said sarcastically. "The battlefield for the Bravehearts is not under the bed."

A chill ran down from Nawab Rangile's head to his foot. With great difficulty he crawled out and invented a reply, "I was just looking for my sword. How could I face the enemy without a weapon?"

"Did you find it?" Sher Singh asked laughing up his sleeves.

"Of course," said Nawab Saab, pulling out an ancient sword from its sheath. Then he brandished it in the air a couple of times. Puffing up his chest, he reminded, "I hope you have not forgotten to get the prize money, rupees ten thousand cash."

"Sorry, it is in the safe custody of the *mukhia*."

"Tomorrow it will be in my pocket." Nawab Saab smiled. Putting the sword back in its sheath, he dismissed Shera, "Well, now you may leave. Go home and have a good sleep. Soon after that I will march straight into the forest. Goodnight."

But Sher Singh too knew his friend too well. "Rama-Rama," he said. "How could I be so rude? For your information, the *mukhia* with his committee of five senior citizens is also expected here soon to see you off to the jungle trail."

Now, not only did the ground move under Nawab Rangile's feet, but the whole globe seemed to slip away, leaving him in vacuum.

Now there was no room left for escape. *"Jal tu jalal tu, aayee balaa ko taal tu..."* muttering this prayer, he started getting ready. First he fixed the sword into his waist band, then putting on his *juti* and *dupalli* cap he turned to Sher Singh, "Let's get going." They walked together to the village square, where the *mukhia* with his team of seniors joined them.

Proudly holding his head high, Nawab Rangile marched ahead of the group like a bridegroom. For a few seconds he had forgotten that he was stepping into the territory of the bandit Bhootnath. Like the bridal procession Sher Singh and the village elders followed him.

Soon the village lights were left behind. The dark forest was in front of them. The procession halted. The *mukhia* wished Nawab Saab good luck and waited for him to enter the forest. Nawab Rangile was dripping in sweat like a raining cloud. The cursed forest seemed to be gaping at him.

"Bbbbbismillah!" he stuttered and put his best foot forward. The

darkness thickened as he limped forward. The shrieking and roaring in the wilderness became audible. Nawab Rangile's legs began to tremble. Soon his whole body was shaking…. He had neither the energy nor the courage to move forward.

He was standing under a tree and thinking fast. 'If I climb up the tree and spend the night on the top, I will be absolutely safe and the night too will pass swiftly. So why wait?' Within a few minutes he was resting on the topmost branch of the tree.

How was he to know that the bandit Bhootnath too had chosen the same tree to get some sleep? Bhootnath woke up with a start and said in a menacing voice, "Who's there?"

"Me…me…me…"

"Are you a man or a mouse?"

Naturally the Nawab felt insulted. He instantly retorted, "Of course I am a man, the original Braveheart, Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile of Nagadapur fame."

For a moment Bhootnath pondered, then asked, "What brings you here, Your Highness?"

"Bhootnath." By now, the Nawab had regained much of his poise and composure. "That rogue has terrorised the whole village. Today I have sworn to catch him by his hair and take him to the *mukhia* to hang him by the neck. But who are you?"

"Me?" Bhootnath was amused, "I am Lallu, the sweet-seller."

"What are you doing here?"

"In these days of recession my business has gone to the dogs. So I thought, why not catch Bhootnath and win ten thousand cash!"

"Oh, I see!" Nawab Rangile exclaimed, "So you have also been lured by the prize-money! Let me tell you frankly, Bhootnath is not your cup of tea. He is destined to die by this sword."

"Misfortune never comes alone." Trying to suppress his laughter, Bhootnath sadly declared, "No business in my shop, no bandit in my fortune. Now what is the use of me spending the night here in the wilderness? Better I leave…"

"Oh no!" Nawab Saab cried out in alarm, to stop him.

In this ominous dark night he was the only companion available. If he

deserted Nawab Saab who would save him from the creatures of the night? Anything could happen at this time and place. A ghost may emerge from the dark and gobble him without sauce or spices!

"Lalluji..." he said pleadingly, "I have no right to dishearten you. Maybe it is your cup of tea. If I succeed in this venture, I will gift the prize-money to you. After all, money is not everything. And we are not that hard-pressed. To be honest, all the gold of my Begum is still safe in the house."

The word *gold* excited Bhootnath. He decided to steal the Begum's jewellery before dawn. So he said, "Your Highness, I don't think that rat, Bhootnath, will dare to show his dirty face tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because Braveheart has personally come to challenge him."

"So?"

"Since you asked me...I suggest that instead of spending the whole night on this tree top, we should go home and sleep in peace."

For Nawab Rangile that was a welcome suggestion. Both of them slipped down the tree. They started walking towards the village.

"You said that you are a sweet-seller. Where do you come from?"

"Dholpur, Your Highness," Bhootnath lied. "*Kismet* has turned against me. The shutters are down. I have not eaten a single meal for the last two days."

Nawab Rangile's heart melted. "My dear Lalluji, do not get disheartened. Have faith in Allah. Just remember, every cloud has a silver lining. Let us have dinner together at my place."

"Oh, no..."

"Oh, yes." He insisted, "Be my guest. If you share my meal, my Allah too will be pleased."

It was almost midnight. Begum Rangili was lying awake in bed praying, when a knock on the door was heard—loud and clear. She jumped up with a start. "Who's there?"

"Me, your Braveheart," Nawab Rangile proudly replied.

Begum opened the door. The moment she saw the stranger with her husband, she pulled her *dupatta* down over her face.

"Don't feel shy Begum," Nawab said introducing the guest. "This poor

guy has not eaten anything for the last couple of days. Quick, make *halwa-puri* as fast as you can."

Begum retired to the kitchen. "Can you hear me?" she called from inside, after a few moments, while kneading *atta* for *puris*, "you have not said anything about the bandit?"

"What is there to say?" There was a ringing tone of success in his voice. "When that son of a rat came to know that this son of a gun is looking for him, he simply vanished."

"Really?"

"The eye witness is right here. Ask Lalluji."

The bandit Bhootnath, who had entered as Lallu the sweet-seller with Nawab Rangile, confirmed politely. "After all, His Highness is nationally known for his daring. How could that bandit think of even crossing his path?"

Nawab Saab felt, he was taller than the tallest coconut tree. His head was in the sky and he was in seventh heaven. But Begum Rangili was not that gullible. She had become alert the moment she had a glimpse of the guest. 'There is something dubious about the chap. The Nawab says he is a sweet-seller. But who has ever seen a halwai with a hard, threatening face?'

Then who was that stranger?

By the time she finished cooking, her suspicions had turned into conviction. For, she knew that there was no halwai or confectioner in neighbouring Dholpur. Whenever the locals there wanted to buy sweets, they would, in fact, visit Nagadapur.

The Begum had calculated correctly: The Nawab thinks, the guest is Lallu the halwai. But he is none other than the bandit Bhootnath.

Hai Allah!!!

What will happen now? There was no use raising an alarm. Bhootnath would simply take out his pistol, pull the trigger... Bang... Bang...Bang... and shoot her husband point blank.

"My dear Begum," Nawab Rangile lovingly called from the drawing room. "How long will you keep us waiting? Our bellies are howling like hungry dogs. You want us to go to bed on an empty stomach?"

Sleep! An idea struck her. Sleeping pills! The best remedy to knock off

the devil in disguise. Immediately she took the bottle of sleeping pills from the shelf, pounded all the pills and mixed the powder into a plate of *halva* meant for the bandit.

Pleased with her own ingenuity, she entered the drawing room with two plates of *halwa-puri*. Nawab Saab jumped from his chair and grabbed them. Before she could wink, he stood before Bhootnath sitting on the *charpai* with the *thalis*.

"Lalluji, the *halwa-puri* dish, prepared by the master chef, Begum Rangili of Lucknow, is internationally known for its flavour and taste. Whenever our Chief Minister visits Nagadapur, he relaxes on this same *charpai* and relishes the same dish. Not only that, he carries a tiffin-full with him to Delhi for his wife and children. Now stop talking and start eating."

The Begum felt like banging her head on the wall. The adulterated plate that was meant for Bhootnath was in Nawab Rangile's hands and Bhootnath was savouring pure *halwa-puri* dish!! 'Oh God, please help us.'

"Listen, my dear…"

Nobody listened to her plea. Nawab Saab and the bandit were so engrossed in gobbling *halwa-puri* that even an earthquake would not have disturbed them.

"What a delicacy!" Nearly half the plate was empty when Nawab Saab exclaimed, "*Subhan Allah!* A dish descended right from the heavens. Wish I could swallow the plate also! Lalluji…"

"Ah!"

"Perhaps you are not aware, why Miss India is jealous of my Begum."

"Why?"

"Till this day she has failed to prepare such tasty *halwa-puri*." Now he turned towards the kitchen, "why are you hiding behind the door? Do not feel shy. Come and have a spoonful."

"What!" She felt as if a fish bone had stuck in her throat.

"You have put your heart and soul in the making," he stepped towards her, "now, I am offering it to you with all my love."

"No, no. I am not hungry…"

"If you refuse once again you will see my dead body."

She kept on turning and twisting to save herself from the forcible feed.

But the last words of Nawab Saab made her surrender. She had to open her mouth. Instead of a spoonful, he stuffed the rest of the *halwa* down her throat.

"My dear friend," Nawab Saab said returning to the *charpai*, yawning, "Tell me honestly. You are a *mithaiwallah*, have you ever cooked such a delicious dish?"

"Not even my father prepared anything like this."

"Did you hear, Begum?" Spreading his legs on another *charpai*, he affectionately called out, "a real compliment from a real *halwai*... not even his father...not even his forefathers...zzzzzzzz!"

He wanted to say much more but his eyes began to droop. He began to snore. In the kitchen Begum too was feeling dizzy. She was feeling sorry about her ingenious idea. She was literally cursing herself. But what is the use of repenting when the horse has bolted?

Within minutes she too was sleeping like a log.

The bandit Bhootnath was quietly watching the scene. A miracle, he thought. Simply incredible. Soon he was at work. Quickly he opened the safe, grabbed the jewellery box and walked out the front door like a gentleman.

THE GHOST WHO WALKS

A few decades ago, every morning the people of Nagadapur would wake up to the melodious tune of 'cock-a-doodle-do'. After independence (1947), the siren of a new cotton-mill took over the job. The loud shrieking of the siren had neither the sweet twitter of birds nor the bitter cawing of the crows. Yet the people of Nagadapur accepted this harsh reality with the changing times. Sher Singh was no exception.

As the siren started blowing, he woke up. Sitting on his bed, he put a finger in his right ear and shook it a couple of times as if to drive out a hidden mosquito. Then he yawned like a lion. When he shut his mouth, he remembered the dream he had had in the night. He had seen Nawab Rangile and the bandit Bhootnath face to face and nose-to–nose... Operation Black Beard in action!

Both had swords and shields in their hands and were attacking each other fiercely like real Rajput warriors of the medieval ages. Then what happened? Did Nawab Saab chop off Bhootnath's head like a cucumber? Or did the bandit Bhootnath make mincemeat of Braveheart? He did not know. Before this duel could end the siren had already started screeching.

After completing the morning rituals, he straight away went to Nawab Saab's house. "Your Highness!" he called out sarcastically, standing before the closed doors. "The siren has failed to wake you up. Shall I get a bugle to blow in your ears?"

Then he stopped to think... 'Nawab Rangile must have returned home late last night. How could he be awake so early? After a late night programme Nawab Saab always slept for a day or two. But what was

wrong with Begum Rangili? She was an early bird. Why was she so quiet?'

The *purwai* or a strong breeze from the east pushed open the doors. Sher Singh was amazed, for he knew the old habit of his friend to bolt the door after dinner. Then put a lock on the inside as well.

Cautiously Sher Singh took a couple of steps and peeped inside. What he saw was unbelievable. Nawab Saab was lying on the *charpai* as if he had taken a bowl of poison: one leg was on the bed while the other was dangling lifeless, both of his hands were wide open. He lay like the dead body of Alexander the Great.

Now Sher Singh 'panned' his eyes. On the kitchen floor laid Begum. Her condition was no better than her husband's. It did not take long for Sher Singh to guess that this was the doing of the bandit Bhootnath. Somehow he must have broken into the house, poisoned both of them and walked away with Begum's jewellery box. It was quite obvious—the safe was lying wide open- and empty.

"Oh Rama Rama..." With the name of God on his lips, Sher Singh ran to inform the police.

"What's the matter with you, Shera?" the Superintendent of Police (SP) Bandukilal asked, twirling his moustache. He was sitting comfortably in his chair with his legs on the table. "Has some mad dog bitten you in the market?"

Sher Singh had come running so fast that he was out of breath. For some time he could hardly speak. He simply kept on huffing and puffing and breathing heavily. Then he opened his mouth, "Rama Rama!"

"What?"

"The sky has fallen!"

"Where?"

"There."

"There?"

"Bhootnath."

"The sky has fallen on him?"

"Oh no. Last night our Nawab Saab had gone to fight a duel with him." Sher Singh tried to put some sense into his words. "I just visited his house and saw both of them..."

"Dancing?"

"No, Bhootnath poisoned them both, cleaned their safe and vanished with the loot."

"Really?" Now, the SP was on his feet. "Are you sure you have your brains in the proper place?"

"Come with me and see for yourself," Sher Singh replied. "Both the dead bodies are lying in the house."

SP Bandukilal placed his cap on his head, slipped a pistol into his waistband and left the police station with Sher Singh. It was seven in the

morning. From every house one could hear the loud sounds of throat cleaning and brushing of teeth with *neem* twigs. Some people were sitting on their verandahs gargling. Tayyabali Bohri, popularly known as TB, was one of them.

"What's the matter, Sir?" TB asked the SP clearing his throat. "Did someone's goat disappear last night?" He got no answer. But Sher Singh disclosed the shocking news. "Nawab Saab and his Begum are no more in this world."

The entire neighbourhood was stunned, but TB seemed unaffected. "Killing a paper tiger is alright. Killing a real tiger is altogether a different story. Your Nawab must have realised this, but what's the use now?"

Just like Sher Singh, SP Bandukilal peeped inside from the door of Nawab Saab's house. Then he softly entered. Sher Singh was behind him, "What do you think, Sir?"

"It's as clear as daylight." He declared after carefully observing the scene of the crime. "Umpteen times I had warned Nawab Saab not to meddle in police-work. But he would not listen. Now the result is before you to see. Bhootnath showed them the road to heaven and walked away. Now what can I do besides joining the funeral procession!"

Though Sher Singh's eyes were filled with tears, he asked angrily, "Isn't it your duty to arrest and hang the culprit?"

"Oh, so now you realise that policemen are here to do some job!" The SP Bandukilal smirked. Then he barked, "Go and ask the dead to catch the crook. After all he was your saviour. Why bug me?"

"But..."

"I said, for heaven's sake stop pestering me!" he screamed as he moved towards the entrance. "At the moment my whole attention is focused on the forthcoming elections."

By then a huge crowd had gathered in front of Nawab Rangile's house. Everyone wanted to know what had actually happened? Had Nawab Saab and Begum Rangili really left this mortal world or was there still some hope?

Seeing the readymade crowd, the SP Bandukilal could not control himself. He loved delivering passionate speeches during election days

and here was a golden opportunity to say a few words.

"Friends, countrymen! Believe me, my head is reeling, my heart is bleeding, my soul is screaming, yet I have to fulfill my duty." Twisting his moustache he began, "Maybe, destiny has chosen me to deliver this calamitous news to you. Nawab Rangile was a noble soul and a saviour of Nagadapur. Such warriors are not afraid of anybody, not even of darkness. That same great Braveheart pulled out his sword to crush evil and sacrificed his life and wife, both."

The crowd was thunderstruck. It was a heart-rending experience for Hindus as well as Muslims. Of course, after independence, His Royal Highness Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile was no more their official ruler, yet he was the darling of the people. Listening to his funny tales, not only children, even elders used to rock and roll with laughter. Some of his anecdotes were so popular that people enjoyed narrating them for fun.

But today, humour was out of question. How could one think of even trying to smile when two coffins were ready for burial? Nawab Saab lay in one, Begum Rangili in the other. The whole village was present for the funeral procession. The SP Bandukilal was there and TB too was present. Pandit Makhanlal was there shedding genuine tears and Mullah Ali Wali too was wailing.

Both the coffins were swaying and swinging as they were carried from shoulder to shoulder and lane to lane. The villagers showered flowers from balconies and windows. The poor Dalits garlanded the coffins while the rich ones spread sheets of roses. Some sprinkled Gangajal while others threw sacred water from Zamzam. It was an unforgettable view of communal harmony—one never witnessed before in independent India.

Kallu Kulhadi had already kept two graves ready. The site was judiciously chosen. There was a laburnum tree over it. With every breeze a few red petals would come swaying down and spread on the ground. Sher Singh was watching quietly with tearful eyes. In Nagadapur, Nawab Rangile was the only person he was close to. His untimely death had affected him the most.

When the dead bodies were taken out to be lowered into the graves, Pandit Makhanlal cried, "Wait!"

Everyone was stunned. All eyes turned towards him. No doubt, some

worm had wriggled into his master brain. "I want to ask a simple question to my learned Muslim friends," he announced.

Muslims and Hindus became alert. Surely Panditji had something up his sleeves. But no one could guess what was cooking. TB lost his patience, "Out with your question. I don't like *faltoo* suspense."

"Please...this is a serious matter." Panditji said maintaining his grave façade. Then softly he threw a heavy missile. "Before we lay Nawab Saab

to rest, we must be sure that he was really a Muslim."

For a few moments, all the faces in the crowd turned from small screen to cinemascope. TB turned to Mullah Ali Wali. Mullahji glared at Panditji and asked shrewdly, "What made you think that Nawab Rangile was not a Muslim?"

"Can you prove that he was?"

"For your knowledge, not only Nawab Saab, his whole clan up to

Baba Adam was the follower of Islam." Now he had to present some evidence in favour of Nawab Rangile. "At the time of *Moharram*, he prepared *taboot* with his own hands. Every Friday afternoon, he religiously visited the mosque for *Namaz*. And on that day, he would unfailingly take a bath, though he preferred to skip it the rest of the week. Want some more proof? Every year he celebrated *eid* festival lavishly, whether he had money or not."

The committee of five senior citizens nodded their heads in unison and fully agreed with Mullahji before turning to Pandit Makhanlal. Now it was his turn to come forward and present arguments in his defense. So he launched a frontal attack.

"It is true that Nawab Saab made taboot for the Moharram. But it is equally true that the same hands created taller then the tallest Ravana for the *Dussehra* day. It is true that every Friday he would go to the mosque to offer prayers and it is equally true that every Saturday he would receive *prasad* from the Hanuman temple. Want some more proof? Muslims loved him, no doubt, but Hindus worshipped him."

The committee of five senior citizens nodded their heads in unison and agreed with him also. The situation became more complex. Unless it was decided either way, burial was not possible. Thanks to the cunning of the politicians, the whole village was divided into two camps. On both sides the tension was quite visible. A storm was brewing.

Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* and the village elders were in a fix. If they declared that Nawab Saab was a Muslim, the Hindus would be offended. If they announced that he was a Hindu, the Muslims would feel hurt. There was every possibility of a riot—a free-for-all.

Finally the *mukhia* in consultation with his committee of five seniors found a solution. There lived a wise 99-years old man in Nagadapur. This complicated matter would be placed before him and whatever verdict that umpire gave would be binding on both the sides. Panditji had nothing to say against it. Mullahji too agreed generously.

Soon the whole crowd marched towards the village. Only the grave digger, Kallu Kulhadi remained seated in the cemetery smoking his earthen *chillum*. To forget the heartache of Nawab Saab's death, he had added a touch of opium to the tobacco. He was puffing frantically when his eyes

started rolling. He sat up and focused his gaze. Holy cow! Was he seeing things? Nawab Rangile's dead body was sitting upright just like him and gazing straight at him.

'The opium has gone to my head,' he thought. Then a question raised its head. 'Can one become a ghost so soon after death?' Before Kallu could think any further, Nawab Saab winked at him. Kallu's eyes popped out. The pipe dropped from his hand. He collapsed where he was sitting.

Nawab Rangile looked around scratching his head. Then he woke up Begum and declared, "Abracadabra! I am a miracle man. Behold, we slept under a white ceiling and woke up under a blue one. And what a huge roof it is, the sky!"

Begum Rangili's brain failed to grasp anything. She was on her feet looking around dazed as if still in sleep. Nawab Saab got up, held her hand and started trotting towards the house whistling.

Just at that time, the wailing crowd was returning to the cemetery. A decision had been taken. The wise old man had declared in clear words, "Since Nawab Rangile was Muslim by birth; his last rites should also be performed according to the Muslim tradition." Pandit Makhanlal and his followers accepted the decision magnanimously.

'Soon Nawab and Begum will disappear six feet under. Now we will never-ever see them again.' This thought of burying them had plunged the villagers once again into gloom. Inconsolable grief filled their hearts. Tears were rolling down their faces. Those with extra sensitive hearts began to beat their chests and bang their heads.

Nawab Saab saw the funeral procession coming from afar. "I am afraid," he told Begum Rangili, "that last night, the bandit Bhootnath has plundered the whole village. Not spared even a single house! Look, how all of them are lamenting!"

Suddenly Begum Rangili remembered last night's incident. She guessed Bhootnath would not have left her jewellery untouched. As the thought hit her, she too started beating her head with her fists. Naturally Nawab Rangile was surprised. "My jewellery box...my jewellery box..." cried Begum as she darted towards the house. For Nawab Saab, money wasn't everything. So he dashed towards the procession to console the villagers.

Pandit Makhanlal led the funeral procession while Mullah Ali Wali was at the other end. He was beating his chest the way *Shia* Muslims do during Moharram. Nawab Rangile followed him trying to console, "Listen Mullahji, why cry now? That which was destined, has happened. Who can change destiny?"

Mullahji hardly listened to him. Raising both his hands to the sky, he kept on lamenting, "Cry o sky, and cry o earth! Cry o sun and cry o moon! Cry o birds and cry o bees! Cry o ants and cry o elephants, cry your hearts out. Nagadapur has lost its glory."

Nawab Saab realised it was futile to give solace to these people. The catastrophe was unheard of. What could he do alone? So he turned and followed Begum home.

When the procession reached the cemetery, people were perplexed. Kallu Kulhadi was lying unconscious and both the dead bodies had disappeared. Everyone's tears froze, eyes stilled, mouths wide open.

Mullah Ali Wali cast a suspicious glance at Panditji. Could this be a prank of the Hindus? Had Panditji's camp smuggled the dead bodies and dumped them somewhere else?

At that precise moment, Kallu Kulhadi regained consciousness and saw a dozen ghosts dancing in his head with witches and goblins. His mind had become a den of spirits. He screamed hoarsely, "Bhoooooot... Bhoooooot..." Before anyone could inquire, he bolted through the crowd and ran towards the village.

Once again people were baffled. 'What was happening here? Where were the dead bodies?' No one had an answer. Panditji turned to his committee of five seniors. By now Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* had surmised that a man-eater must have come from the forest or maybe a pack of hungry wolves attacked and carried away the dead! No wonder, seeing such real horror in front of his eyes, Kallu lost his mind. Yes, that sounded quite logical!

The crowd left the cemetery again for the village. TB was there walking with the *mukhia*. He asked, "Then why did Kallu cry, 'Bhoooooot-Bhoooooot?'" Now that was a million dollar question. To get the correct answer, it was imperative to hold Kallu by his neck and give him two hard slaps. So far a third one was never required to make that junky talk.

"If he has really come under some spell then I know how to cure him." Mullah Ali Wali said proudly, raising his head like an ostrich... "I have humbled the most dreaded devils and corked them in bottles."

Before he could boast any more, Kallu was seen hopping in the village square like a mad bull. He was still screaming '...Bhoooooot-Bhoooooot!'

Mullah Ali Wali boldly went forward and holding Kallu by his neck thundered, "Whose ghost?" Then he gave him two real hard slaps before asking again, "Where is the ghost?" Kallu instantly pointed his finger at Nawab Saab's house.

All eyes turned in that direction. The people could clearly hear some sounds coming from inside. Cautiously Mullahji proceeded towards the house. So did the crowd. They had almost reached the house when the great Nawab Rangile appeared in the window with a grin.

For a few moments Mullah Ali Wali stood paralysed to the ground. Aghast, the villagers watched with wide bulging eyes. "Bhoooooot! Demon! Monster!" Mullahji screamed at the top of his voice as he took to his heels. The people ran helter-skelter as if a missile was about to be dropped on Nagadapur.

Within minutes the whole village had a deserted look. Fear reigned over it like a dark, heavy blanket of night. People bolted their doors and waited with bated breath. Mullahji had closed his door and from inside put three big locks for safety.

Nawab Rangile was still at the window, wondering, what was happening. Where have all the people disappeared?

Panditji's house was next to that of Mullah Ali Wali. "Miya, do you hear me?" Panditji called, partly opening the window.

"I am not deaf." Mullahji too peeped through the slit and replied, "Whatever you want to say, say it quick. Ghosts can enter your house through that slit also!"

"What!" Panditji shot back. "Why through my window? Why my house, why not visit your house?"

"My dear friend, don't forget, you had forcefully argued that Nawab Saab was not a Muslim. Now, if he is not a Muslim, his ghost also can not be a Muslim."

"So?"

"So what?" Mullahji said with a touch of sarcasm, "Nawab Saab loved you people more than us. Naturally his ghost will enter your house and not mine."

"Impossible!" Panditji replied icily. "After all he was a Muslim and you Muslims were all proud of him. In short, his ghost will choose a Muslim's house. And that is you."

As both of them were bickering through the partly opened windows, Nawab Rangile arrived. Instantly, both the windows closed with a bang. Nawab Saab looked at them wondering, 'What's gone wrong with this crazy neighbourhood? Why this hostility, why this aversion to my face?'

He knocked on Panditji's door.

Panditji's legs began to shake in his *dhoti*. His teeth started chattering. Somehow he managed to plead, "Mmmmmmy ddddddear ghost of Nnnnnnawab Rangile, you ssssseem to have a wwwwwrong address. Mullahji stays nnnnnext door."

Now the fog of confusion lifted a little. 'Heavens! They think I am some sort of spirit that has come out of a bottle.'

"Panditji..." He called out loud and clear, "I am not a ghost?"

"Then who are you, a genie?"

"Of course not."

"Then you must be a devil in disguise!"

"I am the same Braveheart that I always was."

Panditji felt a little confident. Even then, he opened the door only a little and asked, "Are you sure?"

"Come out and touch me."

Hesitatingly he came out and touched Nawab Saab. It is believed that ghosts are transparent, but this *miya* was undoubtedly solid like a rock. Now he was fully convinced. So he asked, "Then...you didn't die?"

"Dead? My foot! I am going to live for hundred years."

Panditji could not help laughing at his own folly. Hearing him laugh like a maniac, Mullahji and Sher Singh too came out of their houses. When they were fully convinced that Nawab Rangile was just Nawab Rangile, they had a good laugh too. Within no time the news spread through the village. Soon every one was roaring with laughter.

"I am a miracle-man indeed." Nawab Rangile declared proudly having

tea at Sher Singh's place. "Whenever I wish, I make people cry and whenever I desire I fill their hearts with joy."

"That you have proved beyond doubt." Sher Singh agreed taking a sip from his cup. "Sometimes you are simply wonderful."

"Not for my Begum," he confessed. "She is crying her heart out. Bhootnath has vanished with her jewellery box."

"That means, tonight you will definitely march into the forest to complete Operation Black Beard."

"Of course."

"I knew it, there is one and only one Braveheart in the village."

"And that is me." Nawab agreed graciously puffing out his chest a little more.

BUNGLING IN THE BURKA

Enemies are born out of inimical acts. If a dog bites a man, the man considers the dog as his enemy. If a person is walking on a road and a cat chooses to cross his path, the person brands the cat as his enemy.

Likewise someone may have a tiger or a mouse as an adversary. But Nawab Rangile feared darkness. He was so scared of it; it was as if a gigantic monster from a fairy tale, dwelling in the sky, was always ready to surround him after sunset. Sometimes he felt the darkness chase him like a leopard, and could catch him before he reached home. Unfortunately, he could not use his sword against this invisible foe. All the weapons in his armory failed miserably.

That is why Nawab Saab would start rushing back home just before sunset. Today was no exception. Begum Rangili had gone to Mullah Ali Wali's house to inquire about the health of his ailing wife. Nawab Saab was all alone in the house planning his strategy. He knew, soon, someone would come to drag him out. It was time to go into the forest to capture the bandit Bhootnath. Now, how was he to get out of this?

After some hard thinking, an incredible idea struck him. Immediately he took out a *burka* from Begum Rangili's trunk and wore it. 'In this dress, not only Sher Singh, even the SP, Bandukilal will not recognize me.' Giggling like a squirrel, our Nawab lay on the *charpoy* and within minutes fell asleep.

After some time Begum returned home. The moment she stepped in, she turned back thinking that she had entered the wrong house. She came back and stared at the courtyard. Indeed, it was her own house. Then who

was that lady in *burka* snoring blissfully on the bed?

As she tried to understand the situation, an uneasy suspicion occurred to her, '...has the Nawab taken a second wife?' No sooner did the thought come, Begum's heartbeat started churning. She went down on her knees, beat her chest wildly cursing her misfortune in a loud wail. Just then Sher Singh arrived looking for Braveheart, Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile.

"Oh Rama Rama," he exclaimed when he saw her crying her soul out. "Now everyone knows *bhabhiji* that your *miya* is alive and kicking. Then why this grieving?"

Begum raised her head and looked at him with blood shot eyes. Then she fired him. "You men are good-for-nothing scoundrels. You all have plotted against me. Hai Allah, I am ruined..." Again she started bleating loudly like a Himalayan goat.

"But what's the matter *bhabhiji*?"

"Go in and see for yourself!" she replied with tears rolling down her eyes.

Sher Singh peeped in through the half open door. For a moment, he too got fooled by the *burka*, but next moment his eyes rested on the lady's feet. She was wearing shoes and that too Nawab Saab's! He looked closely. It did not take him long to grasp the situation.

"Don't cry, *bhabhiji*," he turned to Begum Rangili. "I will drag that lousy lady by her hair and dump her in the well."

"Really!" She jumped to her feet happily.

Sher Singh went straight to the charpoy grabbed Nawab Saab by his wrist and pulled so hard that he woke up with a start. "Have you gone crazy? Is this the way to wake up a gentleman?"

"Where is the gentleman?"

"Ah!"

"Is this a new fashion from Mumbai, men wearing *burkas*?" Sher Singh was still dragging him. When they crossed Begum Rangili, she too realised her folly and grinned shamefacedly.

Nawab Rangile was walking and chatting with Sher Singh. "You won't understand it, Shera."

"Understand what?"

"The secret of this disguise."

"If you try to explain, maybe I will be able to grasp a little."

"Keep it to yourself, I am an undercover agent." Nawab Saab whispered, "And I have put on this *burka* to fool bandit Bhootnath."

"Great!"

Sher Singh was all praise for this brilliant idea. He had thought that Nawab Saab had put on the *burka* to fool everyone except Bhootnath, i.e. to spare himself from going into the forest, as nobody would have recognized him in it. In fact, that was the truth. But Nawab Rangile knew very well, how to put a *burka* over the truth as well.

Very cleverly he had saved himself from disgrace. But that did not solve the problem. The moment he realised that Sher Singh was taking him in the direction of the forest, his legs began to tremble again. Just then a miracle happened.

Mullah Ali Wali's wife Chandni was a mentally sick woman. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, she would go on the roof top and disco dance or go to the cemetery and play *hututu* alone. Now, Chandni had disappeared since that morning. Mullahji went looking for her on the roof top first, glanced over the cemetery. No luck. After searching every nook and corner of the village, he was returning home in the evening, utterly exhausted. When he reached the village square, he spotted Sher Singh leaving for the forest, holding the hand of a fake but gracious lady in a *burka*.

Mullahji was on guard. His wife had worn a dark green *burka*. The lady accompanying Sher Singh too was wearing the same coloured *burka*. Without giving a second thought, he attacked Sher Singh.

"You…shameless, brainless, heartless, kidneyless crook!"

"Rama Rama…" He was taken aback.

"Drop my *bibi*'s hand right now, or I will bury you alive, here and now."

"Are you in your senses, Mullahji?"

"You *baniya*," Mullahji brandished his stick in the air. "Like a gentleman I am asking you to leave my *bibi* alone and you say that I am talking rubbish?"

Sher Singh was a Rajput and if anyone called him *baniya*, his blood boiled. "Mullahji, hold your tongue. Else … "

"Else what?"

"I am a direct descendent of Raja Sangram Singh," he thundered, "A slap will be enough to send you from Nagadapur to Dholpur via Tabla Ganj without ticket."

Mullahji moved two steps backward. Brandishing his stick in the air like a sword he exploded, "You think I look like a dilapidated house? Then just remember, a single vertical blow of this stick will split not only your head, but your whole body into two."

"Strike if you dare!"

"Slap if you dare!"

"You are provoking me..."

"I am challenging you..."

The committee of five seniors was passing by like five blind mice. They paused to watch the drama. Now Mullahji turned towards them, "Look at this wicked *baniya*! I have caught him red-handed kidnapping my wife and on top of that he is threatening to transport me from Nagadapur to Dholpur without ticket. So I humbly request the honourable members of the Dispute Settlement Committee to..."

Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* with a white moustache that was thick and pointy at the tips, cut him short and asked, "where is your bitter half, err... better half?"

"Ah!" He looked around—there was no lady in a *burka*! His face lost its luster.

"Oh!" Sher Singh too was stunned.

"The wretched woman vanished once again." Once more Mullahji marched away in search of his wife.

Sher Singh was thinking fast. 'Where could Nawab-in-disguise have gone?' There could be only two answers to this vital question. One, he has gone home. Second, he has made straight for the forest to trap the bandit Bhootnath and this was unimaginable. So Sher Singh with the committee of village elders went straight to Nawab Saab's house and called him aloud thrice. At last Begum replied from behind the doors, "Did he not leave with you?"

Sher Singh was really puzzled. "What's the problem, Shera?" The *mukhia* asked, watching his face change colours.

"I...I really don't understand!"

"But what is there to understand? If Nawab Saab is not in the village, then he must be on the battlefield."

"That's exactly what my brain refuses to accept."

"Why?"

"It is almost impossible to expect Nawab Saab to go willingly into the dense forest and that too at night."

"Shera, the prize of Rs. 10,000 is enough to turn a mouse into a lion." The *mukhia* argued, "Our Nawab Saab is a warrior by birth, a real Braveheart, that is, if you ignore some of his antics."

They were about to disperse when they met Mullah Ali Wali once again. "Have a *peda*." He offered one to the village chief. As the *mukhia* opened his mouth to ask, 'what's the occasion?' Mullahji shoved three *pedas* into it. Then he offered one each to everyone present there.

"Now you may ask, what's the occasion?"

The *pedas* were made from real cream with a touch of saffron, almonds and pistachios. They were so delicious that every one was busy licking their lips and appreciating it. Finally Mullahji shared his secret. "At last... my *bibi*, my Chandni is back home."

"Ah!" Sher Singh asked bewildered. "Is she really back?"

"What am I distributing the sweets for? Have I gone crazy? Has some mad dog bitten me?"

"Are you absolutely sure that she is none other, but your wife?"

This last stupid question blew Mullahji's top. "You think she is your father's wife!"

"Will you please stop barking like a dog?"

"Ask one more silly question and I will start biting like a dog."

"It is quite possible that she may not be a woman!"

"Oh God, forgive this cursed *baniya*!" In frustration Mullahji spat on the ground and continued, "If my *bibi* is not a woman, then who is she? An ant? An owl?" Now he turned to the five senior citizens. "Gentlemen, has any one of you seen a five feet tall owl in *burka*? Speak up..."

The committee members with *mukhia* looked at Sher Singh. He thought for a moment and declared, "This mystery can be solved only after you peep inside the *burka*."

"Still I fail to understand what makes you suspicious?"

"For the simple reason that the *burka* clad woman who accompanied me last time was actually a *burka* clad man."

"Ah!" Now even Mullahji had paused to ponder. "Man wearing *burka*...You mean some new *burka*-fashion from Pakistan?"

"Not at all." Sher Singh explained briefly. "Nawab Rangile was using this trick to catch the bandit Bhootnath. But this is top secret."

Mullahji jumped up as if a mad bull had hit him in the butt. The fact was, he had lodged a police complaint for his missing wife. When he had returned home after searching all over the village, he found a message from the SP. Now he rushed to the police station. There he saw that SP Bandukilal had detained two burka-clad women.

Both had the same coloured *burka*. One of them was screaming in various tones while the other one was quiet, like a pebble resting on the sea-bed.

"Choose..." The SP boomed. "Choose the one that is your wife."

Mullahji scratched his long silvery beard, for both of them looked alike, as if they were real sisters like *Sita* and *Gita*, long lost in the *kumbh* fair in Bollywood.

"Hurry up man! If you fail to decide in five minutes, you will have to take both these headaches home. *Ek per ek* free."

Mullahji had a brilliant brain wave. He was fed up with his lunatic wife. At the time of marriage, if he had been asked to choose like today, he would never have chosen his present wife Chandni.

'Allah always gives another chance to noble souls. So why not make the best of it?' He thanked God Almighty and chose the docile lady who was coyly standing in the corner with her mouth shut.

Mullahji was pleased with his ingenious idea. He patted himself and brought his new bride home. Soon he had settled her in the bedroom, locked the house and galloped away to distribute sweets. How could he have known then that there was some bungling in the *burka*?

"What's the matter, Mullahji?" Sher Singh inquired seeing his miserable condition. "You are sweating all over!"

What could he say? Yet Mullahji blurted out, "If the earth parts now and I am buried alive, I will be the most fortunate person."

"But why?"

"An owl...five feet tall ...in the *burka*...oh yes..."

"Are you crazy?"

"Oh no! Come with me and see for yourself. By god, mother of all owls, five feet tall..."

Mullahji walked ahead. He had the *peda*-box in his hand. Half the *pedas* were still there for distribution. In his frustration, at every step he would throw a peda into his mouth, curse the day he was born and spit it out. Sher Singh was walking behind him. The committee of seniors was following them.

* * *

In the meanwhile, in Mullahji's house, Nawab Rangile was having a gala time. Not that he was depressed at the police station. For him any damned place was better than the deadly forest. So, whether he spent the night in custody or at Mullahji's house, he was sure, it would be a problem-free, serene night.

In Mullahji's house he had all the luxuries of a five-star hotel. On top of that, the kitchen overflowed with tempting food. A bowl full of *rabadi*, butter, *laddoos*, *gulaabjamun*, *rasmalai*, mutton kebabs, chicken lollipops, fresh fruits...think of any eatable and there it was!

First, Nawab Saab attacked the *rabadi* bowl. Then he cleaned the plate of butter with bread. Before devouring *rasmalai* and other sweets, he finished off the kebabs and chicken lollipops. He so thoroughly licked and cleaned each and every container, that there was no need at all to wash it.

Now, to give the finishing touch to this magnificent meal, he was about to raid the fruit basket, when he heard the sound of the lock being opened. Quietly he tip-toed to the bedroom and sat on the bed in his *burka*. Mullahji entered and sat next to him. Like a shy bride he turned away. Sher Singh and the team of five elders were quietly standing behind the door, watching the best comedy of the year.

Mullahji had decided to teach Nawab Saab a lesson by pulling his leg and making a fool of him before his friends. "Listen, my dear Chandni..."

And he started his *nautanki,* placing his hand lovingly on Nawab Saab's shoulder.

"Bow wow…" came a bark from the *burka.*

"Darling," Mullahji said again, "I am your legitimate husband. And you are my one and only wife. Why feel shy?"

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

"Please remove the *burka.*"

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

"Oh my *gulaabjamun,* why are you angry with me?"

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

"Have I done anything wrong?"

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

"May I know what?"

"Of course…" Forgetting the disguise, Nawab Saab blurted out. "The kebabs were fried in stinking oil."

"Wow! A talking owl!"

"Who says I am an owl?" Now he jumped up, stood on the bed, removed the *burka* cover from the face and said puffing his chest. "I am His Highness Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile, the real Braveheart."

"Your Highness," Mullahji asked sarcastically, "what are you doing in my bedroom?"

"Relaxing after cleaning out your kitchen."

"What!!!"

"You can see for yourself how clean your set of china plates and bowls look!"

A glance was enough to see that the *rabadi, rasmalai,* chicken lollipops…everything had vanished. Mullahji felt like banging his head on the wall, but Sher Singh and the committee of seniors, who were watching this rib-tickling drama from the wings, were laughing madly. Seeing them roll on the floor laughing, Nawab Saab too joined them.

*

When fortune frowns at you, do whatever you may, move mountains, drink the ocean, the result will be zero. Destiny was determined to kick

Nawab Rangile into the forest. What could he do? If it was written that he was to challenge the bandit Bhootnath, who could save him?

If he did not die at the hands of the enemy, it was quite possible that a tiger or a leopard would tear him apart and gobble him up! As it was, the darkness of the forest was enough to give him a heart attack.

"Shera!" he pleaded turning back. "I want to meet my Begum."

"For what?"

"I am a warrior going to the battlefield. Only God knows whether I will return alive like a victor, or dead like a duck."

How could Sher Singh refuse an emotional appeal like that? They both returned home and Nawab Rangile hugged his dear Begum passionately. Naturally she was surprised. She pushed him away and asked, "Are you gone crazy?"

"Begum..." he said with complete seriousness. "If I have hurt your feelings, even unknowingly, please forgive me."

"Forgiven, now what?"

"I am leaving."

"Leaving what?"

"This house, this village, this country, everything I loved and going."

"Going where?"

"That will be decided only after I die, whether I have been offered a grand, royal palace in heaven or a single room kitchen in hell."

"But you were to go to the forest!"

"I am on my way. Take care."

"That I will."

"Remember me in your prayers."

"Of course."

"And do not forget to place some flowers on my grave every Friday."

Now Begum lost her temper. "Get killed, go to hell first, and then ask me to do all that. OK?"

Hearing such nasty words, Nawab Saab too lost his temper. "Let my enemies go to hell. I am going to return victorious like Emperor Akbar. Oh yes." And he charged!

He was in full form. He grabbed Sher Singh's hand and started marching like a soldier with fervour and frenzy. Left, right, left, right. Poor

Sher Singh got dragged along. But Nawab kept on walking proudly. He passed through lanes and bye lanes, till the village ended and the forest started. The village lights were far behind. In front was simply, darkness.

His legs slowed down. His forehead started to perspire; his heart was pounding like a big gun. He mumbled a prayer and moved forward on the track alone.

After dragging his body for a few minutes, he glanced back over his shoulder. The dusky image of Sher Singh was standing there like a pole at the same spot. Nawab cursed him. All hopes of sneaking back home were dashed to dust. He had no choice left but to move into the wilderness.

The wind whistled through the leaves. They made such a frightful sound as if a hundred witches were bursting with laughter. Nawab Saab was cautiously moving forward, chanting a prayer at every step, invoking the angels in heaven above to be really kind and merciful to him.

Sometimes he would look to his right, sometimes to his left. Sometimes he would glance behind, sometimes forward. There was nothing but horror on all sides. He felt that out of the blue, a corpse would rise and twist his neck like that of a chicken. Terror had gripped him so hard that he simply forgot his mission, Operation Black Beard.

After walking a few more steps, he stopped. It was not possible for him to go any further. He dared not. He could clearly hear the hair-raising roar of lions and piercing cries of jackals and wolves. He tried to climb the nearest tree, but the *burka* became a nuisance. On every move it bothered him so he removed it and threw it away. Now he climbed the tree with ease and settled on the highest and the safest branch.

He was relieved. At least for the time being he was out of danger, or so he thought, and breathed freely. No beast could touch him over here. At that moment, he looked down and his whole body began to tremble violently. His heart began to beat like voodoo drums. His stomach was churning like butter milk.

He had seen a ghost rising.

In fact it was neither a ghost nor a demon. It was his own *burka* that he had thrown away. It had landed on a plant and spread in such a way that it looked like a ghost with his arms opened and rising from the grave.

As chance would have it, the bandit Bhootnath was passing from there

at this time. His glance also fell on the same *burka*. Because of the darkness he too got alarmed. Before he could make out what it actually was, a strong breeze blew in. The burka flapped and the so-called ghost flew into the air and advanced towards him.

He screamed, "Help! Ghost!"

The moment Nawab Saab heard the cry; he lost his grip on the branch. Bhootnath was standing right under the tree. Nawab Saab fell on him. The bandit was flattened on the ground. As his head hit a rock he lost consciousness.

Nawab Rangile got up fast and climbed up the tree again. Sitting tight on the topmost branch, he spent the whole night listening to the frightening cries of wild animals, trembling at the thought of the ghost appearing again and praying to Allah to save his skin.

*

Mercifully the night finally got over. With the first rays of the sun, Nawab Saab slipped down slowly and carefully. When he landed on the ground, he saw someone covered in a *burka* sleeping like a log. Cautiously he lifted the *burka* and what he saw surprised him.

Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he would capture bandit Bhootnath. He told the unconscious bandit, "When a jackal dares to provoke a lion, the result is the same." Nawab Saab lifted the body on his shoulder and started for the village.

The day was bright and clear. The villagers were still brushing their teeth on their front verandahs, loudly gargling and cleaning their throats. When they saw Nawab Rangile coming with a sack over his shoulder, their mouths opened wide and their eyes popped out.

"Nabob Saab..." TB asked sarcastically, spitting the saliva. "Is that a man or a mouse?"

"If I tell you who he is, you are sure to piss in your pants."

"Bhootnath!"

When Sher Singh heard the news, he came running with a garland of roses to welcome his dear friend. "By god," he said garlanding him, "You are really Braveheart!"

"What nonsense! Had it been a Bengal tiger or an African elephant, I would have agreed with you. This one is just a kitten! Take him, do whatever you want." Nawab said slipping the load from his shoulders.

When the committee of five came to know about it, they arranged a grand reception to felicitate him. The prize money of Rs.10,000 and Begum's jewellery box retrieved from Bhootnath's bag were ceremoniously given to him by Pukar Singh, the *mukhia*.

THE NON-VIOLENT WARRIOR

Everybody knows that once Nagadapur was the princely state of Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile. Now it is just a modest village. In case you ask—'where in hell is this Nagadapur?' Sorry, we are not supposed to disclose its exact location. Broadly speaking, it is somewhere near the Indo-Pak border.

From Nagadapur you can see the Pak village of Tabla Ganj without a telescope. Sometimes, when the poultry birds are not back in the yard before twilight, Nawab Rangile goes across the border in search of them. Sometimes, the headman of the Pak village, Dahad Ali drops by Nagadapur to buy eggs.

Today, Dahad Ali turned up before the siren of the cotton mill had a chance to screech. As he stood in front of Nawab Rangile's house, he roared, "My dear Nawab Saab, do I have to blow a trumpet to wake you up?"

Nawab Rangile woke up with a start and replied, "Miya Dahad Ali, your sonorous voice is as good as a trumpet."

"Should I blow it again?"

"To raise the roof? Oh no, once is more than enough." So saying he came to the door to unlock the special *Aligadhi* lock that hung from inside.

Dahad Ali stepped in and hugged Nawab Rangile thrice as per tradition. Nawab Saab made him relax on the *charpoy* and asked, "What brings you here, *miya*, early in the morning?"

"To give you the best news of the decade—from tomorrow, I will be visiting you daily."

"For what?"

"Guess."

"Seems... all the roosters of Tabla Ganj have gone on strike!"

Dahad Ali grinned as he answered, "Strikes and *morchas* are the favourite sport of Indians, not us. For your information, Tabla Ganj folks have decided to relish chicken everyday and leave eggs for you people to fry."

"Really?"

"Have you not seen today's paper?"

"Anything special?"

Dahad Ali spread his own newspaper on the *charpoy* and said, "Read it!"

The daily was in English and that was alien to Nawab Saab. So he asked, "Don't you know how to read? I want to hear it in your golden voice!"

For Dahad Ali, written letters were like crawling ants. He could neither read nor write.

"At least you know the gist of the matter!"

"Of course."

Before he could explain, Sher Singh arrived. He read the headline and started shaking. Nawab Rangile was shocked. "Are you all right, Shera?"

"Ccccccccan't you see I am sssssssshaking like a lllllllleaf?"

"But I do not see the sky falling!"

"Then you will see it soon!" He composed himself before throwing the bombshell. "The people across the border claim that Nagadapur is a part of their village. So it should merge with Tabla Ganj."

Now it was Nawab Saab's turn to feel the violent tremors.

Dahad Ali's claim was not entirely baseless. Nor was it entirely true. When India was partitioned (1947) into Bharat and Pakistan, Tabla Ganj was a part of Nagadapur. The British dissected it so mercilessly that Nagadapur was sliced into two halves. The part that went to Pakistan is known today as Tabla Ganj.

Like jungle-fire, the news spread through the village. When the committee of five senior citizens heard of it, they rushed straight to Nawab Saab's house.

"What's the problem, Pukar Singh," Dahad Ali addressed the *mukhia*,

"Cheer up man! If Nagadapur merges with Tabla Ganj, it will be an occasion for all of us to celebrate."

"Ha!"

"As soon as both the parts of land reunite, we will be one once again."

Pukar Singh pondered for a minute before saying, "So it's a question of coming together."

"Exactly!"

"Then why not give Tabla Ganj back to India?"

Dahad Ali gave a fitting reply, "I don't understand the logic of going backward! Pukar Singh, you are a Rajput. In the battlefield you always move forward. Similarly, half of Nagadapur has moved forward with the times. The question is of the other half moving ahead, not the part that has moved ahead to be dragged behind."

"Over my dead body," cried Nawab Rangile, who was a mute witness to the drama so far. "As long as I am alive, it will never happen."

Everyone present there strongly supported Nawab Rangile.

Dahad Ali gathered his newspaper and said before leaving, "Well, well...there is no harm in giving it a second thought. Think India, think."

Along with Nawab Rangile everyone plunged into deep thought. The early morning roar of Dahad Ali had caught the whole village by surprise. By noon, people everywhere were discussing the same topic—will Nagadapur merge with Tabla Ganj?

"What nonsense! This is not a game of chess that you pick up any piece and move it in any direction," Mullah Ali Wali said addressing a gathering, "If the people of Tabla Ganj act too smart, we know how to hit them where it hurts. If, in the coming elections you vote for me, I will tug in not only Tabla Ganj, but the whole of Pakistan to Nagadapur. Oh yes..."

In the saffron camp Pandit Makhanlal was surrounded by his followers listening keenly to his fiery speech, "This is the land where lions breed—Shivaji Maharaj, Maharana Pratap, Rani Laxmibai, etc. etc. Let any one dare raise his wicked eye and..."

"What will you do, Panditji?" Kallu Kulhadi, the grave digger interrupted, "the whole world knows that America is supporting Pakistan."

"If, what you say is true, then vote for me in the coming elections. I promise you, I will haul not only Tabla Ganj, but America also to our sacred

land."

"Now that is something worth considering!" Kallu observed, "after all, who is interested in moth eaten Pakistan?"

"Exactly, that is why Panditji is eager to grab America." Some smart aleck from the crowd explained to Kallu. "And...in the coming elections, if he wins with a thumping majority, then I guess, Europe and Russia too will follow the American trail."

Sher Singh who was quietly listening to all this rubbish, blasted them, "Here, you are building castles in the air. There in Tabla Ganj, preparations have already begun."

They were really surprised. "Preparations! For what?"

"To invade Nagadapur."

"Is this supposed to be a joke?"

"Each and every able bodied man in Tabla Ganj is ready to march forward."

"So what?" Sensing the seriousness of the matter Panditji said, "Don't think that we will be picnicking here."

In Mullah Ali Wali's skull-cap camp too fervour was quite visible. "My dear soldiers, this is *jihad* and I am confident, each one of you is capable of breaking at least a hundred heads of the enemy like coconuts," he said addressing his followers. "My lions, my tigers, my leopards, don't you forget, you are going to the battlefield not to be martyred but to send enemies to hell. Try to escape death as best as you can. For every single life saved is a single vote saved for me. Now march ahead, your motherland is calling you. Victory is ours."

The poet laureate Tooti of the same camp, ever ready for such occasions, broke out in a martial song: 'Watan ki raah mein watan ke naujawan shahid ho...'

No sooner had he started that, when all and sundry, young and old who were gathered there, rolled up their sleeves and started marching ahead. Some carried clubs, others picked up stones; some wielded rusty swords, others slung antique rifles made in 1857 on their shoulders.

Pandit Makhanlal had not finished his speech yet, "This is not an issue between Bharat and Pakistan, but a *panga* between Nagadapur and Tabla Ganj. And we are determined to settle it once and for ever." His oratory

was reaching its climax. "We all know very well, what will be the ultimate result. There won't be any sign of Tabla Ganj on the global map. It is doomed!" Now he yelled at the top of his voice, "Rise! March ahead; your motherland is calling you. Victory is ours."

The poet laureate of Nagadapur, Tota, was anxiously waiting in the wings for the speech to end. He grabbed the mike, cleared his throat and began: *Kadam kadam badhaeja, khushi ke geet gayeja, Yeh zindagi hai kaum ki tu kaum pe lutaeja…*

As soon as the first stanza poured out, all the men puffed up their chests and marched towards the border, all but three. Nawab Rangile was one of them. Now…it is rather unethical to say that our Braveheart was afraid of death. So we will safely declare that he was a peace-loving citizen of Nagadapur. With the first beat of the war-drums, he rushed home and sneaked under the bed.

"Hai Allah!" Begum exclaimed.

"Quiet!"

"I thought there is only one he-man in this village!" Begum smiled as she teased him

"And… if he too loses his precious life on the battlefield, then?" Nawab Saab was arguing from under the bed, "Won't this land become no man's land?"

"But…"

"Stop it! This valiant soldier will have to live, above the bed or under the bed."

"Bhabhiji!" Sher Singh called out from the door, "Is my dear friend tending to poultry in the backyard or fighting on the front?"

"He left for the battlefield long…." Before Begum could finish her sentence, Nawab Saab blurted: "Now you too get lost."

"Ah! Who said that?" Sher Singh grinned.

The Nawab cursed himself for his folly. Soon he crawled out from under the bed and said, "To tell you the truth, I believe in Gandhiji's principle of non-violence. I can not stand the senseless killing and bloodshed. How can a brother slit his brother's throat in the battlefield?"

"What are you driving at?"

"You know well that my god fearing brother Gulabi Khan, my uncles,

brother-in-laws, all are in Tabla Ganj. How could I think of harming them?"

"And if they are determined to gobble up Nagadapur…?"

"Then it will be our sacred duty to give a befitting reply."

"Get set, they have already reached the border."

"Ah!!!"

Out of the three men who had stayed back, at least one was now ready to go to the front. Now there remained two: Pandit Makhanlal and Mullah Ali Wali.

Panditji opened the window of his bedroom and peeped out. He was surprised to see Mullahji in his window smoking a *bidi*. When the two pairs of eyes met, both were startled for a moment.

"Panditji!" Mullahji asked craftily throwing a smoke ring, "When the motherland is calling, what are you doing here?"

"Me? I have stayed back to protect the village. At least, one real soldier is needed for the final battle," he replied. "By the way, I was going to ask you the same question."

"Really?"

"A real tough *jihadi* like you should be leading the army; instead you are smoking behind closed doors."

"There is a reason."

"May I know it?"

"Of course." Mullah cleared his throat and explained. "While guarding the village if a bullet settles in your empty head, someone will be needed to protect the women and children, isn't it?"

Panditji closed his window with a bang.

The *youth* from both the camps marching through different routes arrived in the village square and merged into one unit. From there, 99-year old man carried the flag. He marched ahead. The crowd followed shouting slogans, raising the roof—and dust.

As they came closer and closer to the border, their excitement and their enthusiasm petered out. Kallu Kulhadi was the first to give the crowd the slip. As he was about to escape, Nawab Saab saw him because he too was right at the end. "Stop!" Kallu froze. "Where are you going?"

"To the cemetery." He replied cleverly, "I guess, there will be a heap full of dead on both the sides of the fence for burial!"

Nawab Saab felt uneasy. He thought for a while and asked sheepishly, "Do you need any help?"

"What for?"

"How will you dig so many graves single handedly? It's a job for at least ten people."

Sher Singh arrived looking for Nawab Rangile. "What are you doing here at the back?" he asked catching his friend's hand firmly.

"I am keeping watch so that no one slips away."

"But you are wanted right in the front."

"W...what?"

"You have more experience of the battlefield than any of us." Sher Singh explained, "We still remember that story of yours...how, before independence, you had pounced upon the British troops like a leaping tiger."

"Yes, that is true." He regained his self esteem. "I was all alone with my walking stick and the enemy had 2,000 soldiers with guns and grenades. Within minutes I routed them."

"Wow! Now tell us, an old man holding the flag is leading us to the front and you are guarding the rear like a watchdog, is that right?"

"Of course not." So saying he pulled out his sword from its sheath and brandishing it in the air arrived in the front to lead the assault.

From the other side of the fence, Dahad Ali was advancing towards the border with a rifle in his hand. The men of Tabla Ganj were marching behind him shouting war cries—Allahoo Akbar! Some of them had already donned *kafan*. Who knows, after death whether they would get one or not?

In both the 'armies', there was a visible excitement. Thumping their legs, both the armies reached the border on either side.

"My dear Nawab Saab!"

Dahad Ali roared from the other side, firing in the air. "Be wise, there is still time."

Nawab Rangile was in full form. "Dahad Ali!" he challenged. "If you still have guts, drop your gun and get a sword."

Instantly Dahad Ali dropped his rifle and grabbed a sword from his junior. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, we all are ready, but don't you forget, you people have raised the issue and you will be responsible for all the bloodshed and killings."

"But, in truth, we too appreciate non-violence."

"Then why not we let our wrestlers settle the issue?" Nawab Rangile eagerly suggested. He had found a way to save his own skin. "You enter your wrestling champ in the ring, we will enter ours."

"Subhanallah! Mashaallah!" Dahad Ali too loved this idea. "Our wrestler will easily win and Tabla Ganj will reunite with its long lost brother, Nagadapur."

"Suppose... our champ wins, then?"

Dahad Ali had to admit, "It will be a most unfortunate day for us."

Then both the chiefs hugged each other thrice like tribal chieftains and decided to fix the wrestling match to take place after a fortnight. This decision was whole heartedly welcomed by the people on both sides of the fence.

Believe it or not, any common man, whether a Hindu or a Muslim, does not like war. They all want to live in peace but these simple innocent people are incited by speeches of corrupt politicians and selfish religious leaders.

There was complete peace even before the war could start. Nawab Saab returned to the village square with the army, as if he had brought the trophy, the whole of Tabla Ganj on his head. When Mullah Ali Wali got the news, his face glowed like the moon. For all his voters had returned safe. Pandit Makhanlal too was equally happy.

They both came running to welcome Nawab Rangile. Both of them garlanded him one after the other and delivered the 'correct' speeches to the readymade audience. In the end they both generously praised their Nawab's war strategy. Nawab Saab relished every word and posed like Ashoka the Great. But the real problem popped up now. Which wrestler of Nagadapur should be chosen to face the one from Tabla Ganj? The committee of five invited all the other elders of the village for consultation.

The moment the meeting started, 99-year old man, who was sitting in a corner, jumped up to the stage and declared, "Two of my teeth, out of thirty two, are still intact. Let any monster from Tabla Ganj meet me in the ring. I assure you, I will defeat him twice. If there were three teeth intact,

then..."

Before he could proceed further, Mullah Ali Wali cut him short and launched his own tirade. Soon he was bulldozed by Pandit Makhanlal, who suggested the name of a wrestler from his own camp. "A giant like Pakodimal is born once in thousand years. Even the toughest ones turn into lambs at the mere mention of his name. I implore you all to consider Pakodimal of our Hanuman Akhada for the bout."

"La haul wala quwwata..." Mullahji was searching for a corner to spit out a jet of betel juice as he showered select abuses in Arabic. Finding no suitable place, he pushed it down his throat. Then he glanced at Panditji and continued, "Couldn't you find a better person? If at all we have to select wisely, then why not choose Ghazab Ali? He is a direct descendant of the wrestler Gama's guru's maternal uncle's cousin. Before him Pakodimal is just a little *pakoda.* With a single breath he can make your *pakoda* fly in the sky like a feather."

It was but natural that Panditji lost his cool. He blasted, "If that is what you think then why not arrange a wrestling match between Gazab Ali and Pakodimal? The one who wins will go for the final bout with the wrestler of Tabla Ganj. And I am sure, the winner all the way will be: the one and only Pakodimal the Panther!"

As soon as the *mukhia* accepted the proposal, both the *akhadas* of both the camps became alive with activity. Pakodimal, who used to do 100 pull-ups every morning, started doing 200. Ghazab Ali, who used to eat an omelette made of 100 eggs for breakfast, started taking 200 eggs with 20 litres of milk.

The preparations were in full swing when a bolt from the blue hit both the camps. The news that Tabla Ganj was warming up their infamous wrestler King Kong Khan made both the international wrestlers of Nagadapur feel that the ground was slipping under their feet. Their frame of mind changed, positivity turned to self-pity.

Ghazab Ali gathered all his disciples and asked innocently, "Can anyone explain what a defeat is like?"

One of the *chelas* thought for a while. "It is like...very nasty, very-very unsavoury." He replied carefully, "You lose your honour. No one respects you. You feel like going to the mountain for ever or going down the lake

with a stone around your neck. But *ustadji*, why did you ask such a silly question?"

"I thought, at least once in a lifetime one must experience defeat." After a pause, he continued... "This time, let Pakodimal bask in the glory."

All the disciples gazed at him open-mouthed.

In the other camp, Pakodimal too was contemplating the same thing. So he addressed his disciples at Hanuman *akhada* with humility. "After all, Ghazab Ali is our brother. He is full of vigour, vitality. If I beat him to a pulp in the *akhada* here, then he won't have any energy left to challenge the enemy. I want him to represent..."

"What? What did you say, *guruji*?" A *chela* sitting right in the front said, shocked. "The honour of our *akhada* is at stake."

"You are right, but when it comes to the honour of our motherland, other considerations become insignificant. Be generous, my friends, be magnanimous. Let the people of Nagadapur choose him as our champion."

When Ghazab Ali learnt of this tricky move, he got nervous. He stayed awake the whole night and came out with a master plan. He got admitted into a nursing home. As chance would have it, fever did grip him.

When Pakodimal got the news, he panicked. Now he had no choice but to go underground for a few days. A state of emergency was declared in Nagadapur. No one had ever come across such a delicate situation, nor had heard the like of it. A single question was writ large on every face: Now what?

"Perhaps you have forgotten that..." Sher Singh reminded all village folks, "There is only one Braveheart in Nagadapur."

Nawab Rangile was standing next to him. He puffed up his chest and said, "Yes, that is me."

The committee of five nodded in approval.

The *mukhia* proclaimed proudly, "Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile is the unanimous choice of us all to challenge King Kong Khan, the menace, in the ring."

Nawab Saab was about to collapse when the huge crowd started clapping and cheering him. "King Kong's days are numbered," the Nawab declared proudly. "He is doomed even before death knocks on his doors. I will punch his nose and twist his legs in such a way that he will fall flat

on the ground breathing his last. But..."

"But what?"

"I will need some extra strength to pull that giant down."

"So?"

"If you all decide to help me, I can add a few muscles to my body."

As the honour of the motherland was at stake, the committee of five elders recommended that turn by turn, every household in the village arrange a feast for Nawab Saab. A milkman was assigned to deliver a pot full of milk every morning at his doorstep.

For Nawab Rangile, fortune had finally not only smiled, but grinned at him. Every family treated this special guest lavishly, as if he was the President of India. At Sher Singh's house he ordered *laddoos* in pure *ghee*, while at Mullah Ali Wali's resident his choice naturally was mutton *biryani* and *sivayyan*. At Pandit Makhanlal's *kothi* he was treated to *halwa-puri*, while at TB's house he finished off three big bowls full of cream with *naan* and that too after having lunch. "My God!" TB grumbled, "Is he a man or a mammoth? Eats more than an African elephant."

Yes, that was not totally false. The amount of food Nawab Saab consumed left most of the hosts gaping with wonder. He ate as if he had just arrived from some famine stricken area! Whichever house Nawab Saab stepped into, the host and his family would be left with vessels that had been licked clean.

Within a few days, Nawab Saab became as round as a *golgappa*, round and heavy like an oil drum. Now it required four people to carry him in a palanquin to the house where the treat would be waiting for him. When the palanquin turned towards the *mukhia's* house, the five senior citizens eyes popped out. To them their guest looked like full fledged hippo rather then the skinny human being that was Nawab Rangile a couple of weeks back. Yet they welcomed their shameless guest with a smile. Since they all were committee members, they had jointly arranged for a single lunch.

Nawab Saab was generous enough not to mind it.

Still there was one more household to visit, that of Kallu Kulhadi. His house was close to the cemetery. When Nawab Saab's palanquin arrived, he was digging a grave.

"Has anyone expired?" Nawab Saab inquired as he crawled out of the palanquin.

"Nope."

"Looking for a treasure?"

"Nope."

"Then you must be digging for water!"

"The dead don't need water." He looked up from the grave and explained: "Tomorrow you will be going for the big fight. Unfortunately, tomorrow I will not be here. I have to visit my in-laws."

"So?"

"What I have to do tomorrow, I am doing today."

Nawab Rangile got the hint. Kallu was not digging for a dead body but for someone who was going to be dead tomorrow.

This thought curdled the blood of Nawab Rangile. He had a strange feeling that his obese body was filled with gas and it needed just a pin prick to burst it.

Bang!!!!

Kallu came up from the dug grave, wiped his face with his *gamcha* and said, "Let's move, the food is ready. The aroma is too appetising."

"Not for me," said Nawab Saab sweating heavily.

"Anything wrong?"

"I am already dead."

"But you are fit as a fiddle."

"Bury me now."

"What nonsense!" Kallu exclaimed, "I have specially asked my wife to prepare *murgh mussallam* with *kakori* kebabs and *shahi tukda*."

Suddenly our Nawab's appetite returned with full force. "It will be an injustice to my host if I walked away without even a single glance at it."

After that last feast, Nawab Saab mounted the palanquin and reached home. But the usual sparkle on his face was missing. Even while eating murgh mussallam at Kallu's place he remembered the open grave, with every morsel.

The grave had followed him home! At night, the grave started haunting him in his dreams. He woke up with a scream and hugged Begum tightly. She asked, "What's the matter?"

"N...nothing."

"Why are you holding me like a ghost, then?"

"Oh!" He replied cleverly, releasing her, "I was practicing to grapple my opponent in a new way. Tomorrow, you know, is ...uh, dooms day."

Next day, as the siren of the mill blew in the morning, the villagers arrived at Nawab Saab's house to help him get ready. Sher Singh applied sandalwood paste on the Nawab's body, while Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* gave him a milk bath. Nawab Saab was having a great time.

Now it was the turn of the five elders to rub him dry. The moment they started (together), Nawab Saab's globular body felt ticklish and he kept on laughing all the while. Then Mullah Ali Wali tied an amulet on his right arm for victory and Pandit Makhanlal asked his daughter to perform *aarti.*

Now Nawab Rangile was ready to step into the ring. He had placed a *Lucknowi* cap on his head, his balloon-like body was covered with a tight new *sherwani* and pajamas, and his feet sparkled with new *Salimshahi juti.* When he walked the sword dangled from his waist.

He was marching ahead—like an army chief; the villagers followed him like foot soldiers. For this special occasion the *mukhia* had brought two drummers from Dholpur who beat their drums dancing around Nawab Saab.

The Indo-Pak border became visible. All Nawab Saab saw was the grave that Kallu had dug. All of a sudden his marching feet refused to move further. Sher Singh, who was walking just behind, pushed him so hard that he jumped five feet ahead. Again he stopped. Once again he had to be pushed hard. This time he jumped six feet ahead.

"Here is a real daredevil worth his name!" someone applauded, "he is so impatient to enter the ring that he is not just walking, he is galloping towards it."

Right in the middle of the two borders, on no-man's land, a stage had been erected. It was similar to the wrestling-rings made for international bouts: on all four sides, ropes were tied accordingly.

The people of Tabla Ganj had already arrived and settled on the ground, on their side, facing the ring. King Kong Khan, the menace was beating his bare chest wildly like a gorilla pacing up and down and yelling, 'where

is that Rangile Rat?'

Nawab Saab heard that. Instead of going up and into the ring, he dived under it throwing away his sword. The mighty KKK turned and saw him sneaking. So he started jumping and stamping heavily on the stage. With each thump, the wooden platform shook with a thundering sound that echoed.

Sher Singh was worried. Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* with his committee of five seniors was upset too. The honour of Nagadapur was about to sink. The people of Nagadapur had already plunged into deep sorrow. "Come on, do something, get our Braveheart out. Time is short!" 99-year-old was pleading.

Then, an idea struck Sher Singh. He signaled the drummers. Soon the drummers crawled under the ring and started beating their drums loudly. From the top of the stage, the stomping became more aggressive. It was like a tiger hunt. When the din becomes unbearable, the tiger comes out in the open. Harassed, Nawab Rangile too came out within minutes. Without losing a single moment Sher Singh pushed him into the ring.

The stark reality was in front of him. KKK was face to face with him. Nawab Saab shivered from head to foot. If a child saw the mighty Khan's ugly face in broad daylight, he was sure to collapse on the ground unconscious. Yet...

Nawab Saab did not lose his wit. "King Kong Saab!" He asked trying to puff up his chest, "What type of combat would you prefer? Indian or American style, German or Japanese style?"

"I know of only one."

"Then we will have that one. What is it called?"

"Break neck, skull crack, pulp maker style."

"But that can kill the opponent!"

"Of course." KKK replied, "But the one who emerges victorious, lives."

"It's fine with me." Nawab Saab said confidently, as if a lamb was standing before him. "But..."

"But what?"

"Before we start I would like to take a pot full of honey."

"Help yourself."

Sher Singh felt like banging his head on a rock. Nawab Saab had created

one more problem. From where to get a pot full of honey? Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* too was confused, but he lost no time in self pity. He asked his committee of five to go to the village to collect honey.

On the other side, the headman of Tabla Ganj, Dahad Ali was having a good time with his people. "Before dying people come out with real funny wishes. Nawab Saab remembered a pot full of honey." All had a belly full of laughter.

At last the pot full of honey was delivered to the ring. Forget tasting it, Nawab Saab could not even lift the pot to his lips. He kept on trying desperately, taking deep breaths. The mighty Khan and the people of Tabla Ganj kept on giggling and ridiculing Nawab Saab. Finally, with a mighty effort, Nawab Saab succeeded in lifting the pot up to his chest but before it could reach his lips, it slipped from his hands. The honey spilled out in the ring.

"Rangile Rat!" KKK commented, "Lick it."

The word rat was like a punch on the nose for Nawab Rangile. Growling like a mad dog, he lifted the empty pot and took a pot-shot. Seeing it hit right on target—KKK's head, he replied proudly, "We eat it. You lick it."

The mighty Khan was spitting fire. Nawab Saab was already rolling up his sleeves, inciting him, "My dear little cockroach, don't just glare at me, act, have some guts, come on, make my day!"

KKK lost his temper and charged like an enraged bull. But the ring was sticky with honey. He slipped and fell down on his face. Now it was the turn of the people of Nagadapur to laugh.

"My dear little ant," Nawab Saab provoked him further, "you have licked enough honey. Now please get up!" Hurriedly KKK tried to rise. He slipped again and fell flat on the stage. Once again the people of Nagadapur roared with laughter rolling on the ground.

Nawab Saab stood firmly like a rock. He knew that to step forward would be disastrous. When KKK, the menace, tried to lift himself up for the third time, he slipped once again on his face. Now Nawab Rangile jumped from his corner and landed right on his back.

Young and old, the fans of Nawab Saab gave such a thunderous cheer that the grey clouds that were gathering over Nagadapur dispersed rapidly.

Nawab Rangile was jumping on King Kong's back like a monkey. The mighty Khan was lying with his face down and was thumping his hands repeatedly. After a few minutes, the frantic movements of those hands too stopped gradually. He had lost consciousness.

Sher Singh jumped to his feet and yelled, "Rangile *pahelwan*...?"

The people too got up and responded warmly, "Zindabad."

"Nagadapur...? Zindabad."

The people of Tabla Ganj, with heart-wrenching sobs, returned like fallen soldiers, while the people of Nagadapur chaired Nawab Rangile on their shoulders and danced their way home singing.

Next day, when the headman of Tabla Ganj, Dahad Ali arrived at Nawab Rangile's house, the committee of five seniors was also present along with Pukar Singh, the *mukhia*. They already had a serious discussion over the matter and had come to a decision.

Nawab Rangile informed him, "Miya Dahad Ali, whatever the great leaders of history had decided at the time of the Partition, can not be changed by swords and guns. And also, if you ever dream of grabbing Nagadapur again, we won't hesitate to turn it into nightmare for you all, you understand?"

Dahad Ali was not an idiot. He understood faster than expected.

THE MAGIC OF JING-JANG

The people never forgot.

Because of the conspiracy across the border to gobble up Nagadapur, the atmosphere had become tense. It was the Braveheart, Jung Bahadur Nawab Rangile, who put an end to the nightmare by making King Kong Khan, the menace, lick the dust, literally. Peace returned, but unfortunately for a very short period.

A new dilemma had popped up. The wise 99-year-old man had become an unwise, young man of 19 over night. His newly acquired antics were a real headache for the whole village. Everyone was cursing him, but no one had the guts to tell him on his face. However, last week, Kallu Kulhadi did dare to put some sense into his head.

On that day, as usual Kallu was busy digging a grave in the cemetery when the wise old man dropped in with a catapult in hand. He glanced into the deep ditch and asked casually, "Kallu miya, for whom is this eternal bed being prepared?"

"For the old, haggard horse of Nagadapur who believes he is a stud." Kallu replied sarcastically. Next moment, the old man sprang like karate-kid and delivered such a forceful blow on the neck that Kallu landed in the same grave with his spade. He lay there dazed for over five hours. After regaining consciousness, he came out of the grave and went straight to the house of Pukar Singh, the *mukhia*.

It was not only the men who were fed up with the old man's mischief; the women too were scared of him. The village girls were so frightened of his catapult breaking their water pitchers that they had stopped going to

the pond to fetch water. Now they preferred to sneak into the cotton-mill owner's farm to wash clothes and fill their pitchers.

Next day, old man went to that same spot and like a monkey climbed up a tree in seconds to take up position. Soon he was busy with his catapult taking pot-shots at pitchers and earthenware pots. As soon as a lady filled her vessel and moved away from the farm to go home, her vessel became the target. Suddenly it would explode into pieces and the water flowed down.

Finally, Chanda, the daughter of, Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* mustered courage to step forward with the pitcher on her head. She passed under the same tree on which the naughty old man was hiding. She was moving fast. Her heart was beating faster. Her thoughts were running wild—'oh god! Just a few steps more...now only three steps...two...one...'

She felt relieved. No pebble hit her, but a rude shock did. The old man out had jumped down from the tree top and was standing in front of her in a T-shirt and jeans. Not only that, he grabbed her hand and started dancing, singing a hit Hindi film song—*pyar kiya to darna kya!*

Chanda got so furious that she smashed the pitcher on his head. Was that a head or a rock? The pitcher broke into a hundred pieces, the old man was thoroughly drenched, yet, neither did he let go of her hand, nor did he stop singing—*pyar kiya koi chori nahi ki, choop choop aahen bharna kya!*

Chanda was dazed for a minute. Next minute, she took a deep breath and charged like a wild bull. With full force she hit her head into his stomach. The old man fell back a few steps. Her hand was free. She escaped, not even once turning back to look.

All this while the *mukhia* was listening to Kallu's tragic tale. "After all, what's got into that old man's head?" Pukar Singh wondered. "He goes on delivering judo-punches and karate-chops to anyone and every one who crosses his path. The SP Bandukilal received such a crushing blow that he is still in bed."

Before he could continue, Chanda dashed in. When the *mukhia* heard her sob-sob story, he lost his cool. "What! From pot-shots at pitchers to pot-shots at damsels? How dare he touch my own daughter!"

The *mukhia* was fuming with rage, but what could he do? Our teachers

and gurus say that we all should have high regards for our elders. So we respect them. Their place is in our heart. And here was a naughty old man 99-not out who was bent on destroying this image.

The train of his thought was broken when Chanda added, "Baapu, that old clown was telling me that to tease girls is his birth right."

"That shameless senile, crumbling antique...who gave him that right?" The *mukhia* lost his temper again.

"That you should ask me." Said Pandit Makhanlal as he entered the *mukhia's* house. "To be honest, I smell a rat."

"A rat!"

"What else? The elections are round the corner."

"But what has elections got to do with exploding pitchers?"

"You need a sharp brain to understand such subtle moves."

"You mean I am a dunderhead with rusted brains?"

"I mean you are not a crooked politician who can sniff a wicked move of Mullah Ali Wali from miles away." Panditji said in all seriousness. "But I won't let it succeed."

"What move? What politics?" The *mukhia* got more puzzled.

"Mullahji and his goons want to terrorise our women folks so that they stay at home on the Election Day and not vote for our party." As he explained, he took a fistful of soil and swore: "I swear by the mother-earth, I will set loose all my wrestlers from Hanuman Akhada to teach the unwise old man a lesson he will never forget—we will break both of his legs into four pieces."

When Mullahji got wind of it at home, he smiled and addressed the visitors, who were sipping tea, "If it is true that the wise old man is working for our cause, it is our sacred duty to protect him."

Some youngsters jumped to their feet and yelled thrice in unison, "Mullahji, zindabad!"

"I swear by mother-earth," Mullahji took a fistful of soil from the flower pot and continued. "If they dare to break even a tiny finger of any of our comrades, we won't hesitate to break the hands of hundreds of their workers."

"Mullahji, zindabad!"

Now he got up, put on his long black coat over a white *kurta*, fixed the cap on his head and left with his walking stick for Ghazab Ali's *akhada*.

Mullahji had thoroughly imbibed the first and the last mantra of politics. And what was that? To inflame people is the job of leaders and to shed blood is the job of followers. And all the gymnasts of Ghazab Ali's *akhada* were his committed followers.

Hardly had he stepped into the front yard of the *akhada*, than he froze. His legs turned to stone. His eyes popped out. Not only his hair but his cap too stood to attention. What he saw before his naked eyes was unbelievable.

Ghazab Ali *ustaad*, the king muscle man was lying flat on the ground with his hands spread like an eagle. Two others were in no better condition, their faces licking the dust. The fourth one was holding his leg and crying bitterly. The fifth one, who was standing in a corner, was trembling like a leaf, as if a witch had just kissed him and left.

Mullahji cautiously moved towards him and gently patted his back to console him. He screamed... 'Help!'

Mullahji was thrown three steps backward. 'Oh, my Allah! What's happening here? Has someone cast a spell on this *akhada*?' He just could not guess the reason for this catastrophe.

When Ghazab Ali came back to consciousness, he sat up and bit his own hand to convince himself that he was not dreaming. Then he glanced around. Now Mullahji stepped forward and asked him softly, "What's the matter, young man?"

Ghazab Ali kept on staring at him quietly.

"Has some mad elephant run amuck here?"

He shook his head—no.

"Did a bunch of spirits from the graveyard attack you all?"

He shook his head again.

"You don't mean that the body builders of Hanuman Akhada invaded this place?"

"What rubbish are you talking!" Ghazab Ali exploded as he got up. "Those bed bugs...do they have even spine to stand before us?"

"Then what's the mystery?"

One wrestler, who was holding a leg and crying bitterly, began weeping

more loudly:

Ooooooooooo!

Aaaaaaaaaaa!

Eeeeeeeeeee!

"Mullahji, I am still baffled!" Ghazab Ali was saying, "How did it happen? Why…but why…?"

"But-what-exactly-happened?"

"That old man marched in and made pickle of all of us."

"Whaaaaat? Did you say that…?"

"Yes, I said exactly that…"

"…that dilapidated old rascal single handedly thrashed our lions so thoroughly that they all have become squeaking mice?"

"Well…"

"Shame on you!" Mullahji showered the choicest abuses and spat on the ground before adding, "Unbelievable, incredible…Are you sure you are not trying to pull my leg!" He could not believe what he had just heard.

"Though it is hard to believe for us also, it is cent per cent true."

Then he narrated the whole incident in detail.

That day as usual, the five body builders had done their 100 pushups and other daily exercises before sitting for breakfast. Today's menu was *parathas* and *rabadi*. Early in the morning the sweet-maker had left the big bowl full of *rabadi* on the verandah. But by the time the wrestlers came for breakfast, the bowl had disappeared.

"It was just here, a few minutes before!" a muscle man said pointing to the spot.

"Then where did it go?" Ghazab Ali cast a searching glance at the beards and moustaches of each wrestler to find any trace of *rabadi*. "I have heard of *makhan chor*, never of *rabadi chor*!"

Before he could enquire further, the big, empty bowl crashed on his head and broke into pieces. Everyone looked up. They saw the old man comfortably settled on a mango tree happily sucking his fingers. Naturally Ghazab Ali became so angry, so furious, and so wild that he shook the tree left and right with all his might.

Like a ripe mango, the old man dropped down. All the five wrestlers pounced on him. Blind with anger and mad with hunger, they had

forgotten that he was a poor old man and they were mighty body builders.

The moment they were on him they realised that they were on a live bomb. And when a bomb explodes, the people around are blown away. Similarly the five wrestlers were thrown in different directions. In fact, with his back pinned to the ground, the old man had simply kicked his hands and feet.

As the wrestlers were struggling to get off the ground, the old man rose, dusted his clothes and charged at them. Within minutes he made a mish-mash of them all. The ultimate result? One of them had a fractured leg. Another one, who was seen talking to the wall, had lost his mind. Yet another became deaf as he was boxed repeatedly on his head.

"Fantastic!" Mullahji slipped a finger under his cap and scratched his head. "From where has he derived such amazing strength?"

"That's what we too have failed to understand."

"The day you find out, the victory of our party will be ensured in the coming elections."

Then Mullahji thundered, "Go, search every nook and corner. Don't leave any stone unturned, get that ogre here."

Ghazab Ali was lost in thought. Question number one: 'Where to look for the old man?' Question number two: 'By chance, if found, how to get him here?' The third and the vital question was: 'By god's grace if he decides to come over here, how to make him reveal the secret of his strength?'

In the end Ghazab Ali concluded that it was better to solve the first question first. As long as the primary question remains unanswered, it was foolish to think of the rest.

With the revised breakfast menu of omelette, chapattis, cream and fruit juice, Ghazab Ali and his gang of wrestlers left in search of the old man. One more reason to hunt for the old man was—if Ghazab Ali could get the secret of the magic concoction of vigor and vitality from him, no more would he be called the small town puppy. He would be known as Ghazab Ali, the World Champ.

Passing through the lanes and alleys, they came to the village square and stood transfixed to the ground. The square looked as if a missile had just hit it. All the wrestlers of Hanuman Akhada were lying flat on the ground. Some one was moaning. Another was weeping aloud. Yet another

was imploring God Bajarang to come for help. Next to him, a baldy was simply staring at the sky.

"What's the matter?" Ghazab Ali asked Pakodimal, the *great guru* of Hanuman Akhada, who looked at him in a daze. What else could he do? What could he say? Pandit Makhanlal had commanded them to go and break every bone of the old man. Instead the old man had made *keema* of them all.

"Say something, man!"

"What…?"

"Who bulldozed you all?"

"I would rather stuff my mouth with a dead rat than open it."

"Err… is this phenomenon the marvel of that old man?"

"Ah!" he jumped to his feet, "How did you know?"

"He demonstrated a few of his tricks to us also."

"Really?"

"And right now, we are out looking for him."

Pakodimal thought for a moment before asking, "What will you do after you find him?"

Ghazab Ali was about to blurt out the truth when one of his *chelas* signaled him. Cleverly, he twisted his words before opening his mouth, "No joke, we all have been humiliated without mercy. So long we don't pin him down to the ground, we shall not rest."

"In that case we are sailing in the same boat," added Pakodimal, humbly.

"What will you do?"

"Since you have been mercilessly humiliated, you have a right to settle the score first. Then we will have our chance." Pakodimal replied, adding, "After all, we too have to teach him a lesson or two or three…"

"OK, OK." Ghazab Ali cut him short as he read his face like an open book. "The question is—where to look for him?"

"The real question is—what is the source of his force?"

The moment he uttered these words, his chicken brain sparked. Once the secret of the old man's super strength is revealed, all the opponents of Pandit Makhanlal will be seen running like headless chickens. This year, the elections were going to be a test of strength. The man with muscle

power was sure to win.

When Ghazab Ali realised that Pakodimal too had realized what he had realised, he declared frankly. "My dear Pakodimal, to find the old man's secret it is necessary to capture him first. If you are lucky, the secret is yours. If we trap him first, it's ours, agreed?"

"Agreed."

The deal was sealed. Both the champs hugged each other thrice.

Nawab Rangile, who was passing by, saw this unbelievable sight and exclaimed, "Wow! Am I dreaming? Fire and ice, hand in hand, grinning and giggling, an occasion to celebrate..."

"Of course we will celebrate, but not before we capture that wicked old man." It was Pakodimal who answered. "And the one who will have the old man's neck in his hand will surely offer all of us a treat."

Nawab Rangile was confused. "Has he done anything wrong?"

"Are you living in Nagadapur or Nagaland?" Ghazab Ali stepped in, "You really don't know?"

He shook his head from right to left and left to right.

"The old man is no more old, nor wise."

"What!" Nawab Rangile was astonished. "Has he become young?"

"Exactly! And so young and strong that he humbled each and every body builder of the village."

"That means the Jing-Jang has really worked."

Instantly all the wrestlers prick up their ears like dogs. Pakodimal lost his patience, "Jing-Jang?"

"The herb."

"A miracle herb?"

"Of course. The horse power herb."

"What do you know about it?"

"Everything. It was I who gave it to him."

"Ah!" Ghazab Ali was on his knees holding onto his left leg.

"Ah!" Pakodimal knelt down holding his other leg.

Both the wrestlers began to implore him for the magic herb with tempting offers. "I...I will get a larger then life-size statue of yours made in white marble," Ghazab Ali was begging, "and place it in the centre of my *akhada*."

"I...I will get your statue made with a canopy in gold," Pakodimal announced proudly. "Not only that, from now on my Hanuman Akhada will be known as Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile Gymnasium."

Nawab Saab was thoroughly enjoying all this attention. Who wouldn't? "Ah, what fragrance these words have! Please continue," he giggled. "Don't stop. Go on and on and on..."

Grinding his teeth, Ghazab Ali said threateningly, "whisper the secret in my ear or I will break your leg and put it in your hands."

"If you betray me," Pakodimal's face turned ugly, "I will break your other leg and gift it to my dog."

Both the wrestlers got up and grabbed his neck. The grip was so tight that it became nearly impossible for Nawab Saab to breath. Yet he managed to squeak out, "Wwwwwait, I will rrrrreveal it on one cccccondition."

The wrestlers loosened their grip and pulled back their hands, "Well, what is it?"

"The fact is..." Nawab Saab continued gently rubbing his neck. "I have to disclose the secret to only one person but you are two. So my humble request to you both is—attack! Pounce on each other. Do or die! The winner gets a sack full of the wonder herb, Jing-Jang, agreed?"

"Of course," Ghazab Ali replied.

"Cent per cent," Pakodimal added.

Without a second thought, both the wrestlers fell upon each other. Nawab Saab was waiting exactly for this moment. As both of them were locked in fierce battle, he slipped away.

The followers of both the camps cheered their gurus lustily, offering free tips. Someone was yelling, "Ustadji, this is the time to use break neck skull crack Pakistani punch." The other one was screaming. "Guruji, use Chinese technique of 1965, hit him below the belt!"

Just then both the wrestlers' so-called brains started blinking—where is Nawab Rangile? The next moment they guessed correctly—this was a cunning move: After engaging them in a fight to the finish, Nawab Saab had simply walked away.

Once again, both the champs shook hands. Once again, both the camps united to jointly launch a hunt for Nawab Saab...this time to mash him up as *kachumar* for the crows.

The galloping Nawab Saab turned for a moment and looked back. He froze. Like a thunder storm, a herd of elephant err... wrestlers, were closing in on him. Nawab Saab increased his speed. But the wrestlers were faster than the wind. There was no chance of survival.

Nawab stopped abruptly as he looked up for deliverance and saw his dead father smiling in the sky. Then he saw his grandfather and then all the dead of the clan inviting him to heaven. He closed his eyes and raised both his hands to pray. 'Save me, for You are the only Saviour!' Believe it or not, when he lowered his hands and opened his eyes, he witnessed the mother of all miracles. All the wrestlers had turned back and were running as if the god of death, *Yama* was chasing them.

How was Nawab Saab to know that they had seen the old man smiling in the bushes and taken to their heels? He thought the merciful Allah had responded to his prayers and the result was there for everyone to see. The enemy was running for his life.

Now Nawab Rangile rolled his sleeves, puffed his chest and started chasing them, challenging all the way. "Come on, you cowards! I know how to blow all of you to bits!"

He followed them for quite some time. When he returned, he saw Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* with his committee of five seniors, walking in his direction. A few minutes ago, they had witnessed spellbound a brand new adventure of Nawab Rangile.

Never in the history of Nagadapur, had a single, lanky soul challenged all the musclemen of the village together and made them run scared like rabbits. So the *mukhia* was the first to congratulate Nawab Saab on his grand success. Then he affirmed, "It is beyond doubt that there is only one Braveheart in our village."

"Of course, that is me," he agreed, making his chest broader.

"So we appoint you the Honorary SP of Nagadapur to arrest the old man."

"Ahhhh!" The ground under his feet began slipping. "Has Bandukilal resigned?"

"No," the *Mukhia* continued, "he had gone to catch the old man but the old man caught him first. Now the SP is in hospital with multiple fractures."

"But you should know that I am a lion and the lion is called the king of all animals. And you want the king to go after a rat?"

"True," the *mukhia* argued. "But you will have to catch this rat, for he is your creation."

"It was you who gave him some sort of herb!" One of the senior citizens added, "You have created this problem and you will have to solve it, if you are a real lion."

Now it was a question of prestige. The Nawab had to accept the challenge. "All right," he said confidently. "Within 24 hours, if you do not find him at your feet licking your shoes, I will jump into the well." The five seniors were so impressed with this Bollywood dialogue that they clapped vigorously for five minutes.

After taking leave of the *mukhia* and his team, slowly the fact of the matter dawned on Nawab Saab. The senile old man, who had cut each wrestler from both the *akhadas* to size, was to be cowed down. He started trembling on the way itself.

'The moment the old monster gets the news,' Nawab Saab thought, 'that Braveheart has accepted the challenge to teach him a lesson… he will skin me alive.' But what could be done now besides run for home fast and dive under the bed?

That last thought, he was swift enough to implement. He reached home and slipped under the bed quietly. But he could not escape a glance from Begum Rangili, who was busy cooking in the kitchen. Before she could open her mouth, Nawab Saab called out, "Do you hear me?"

"I can see you also."

"Don't glare at me like that!" he said irritated. "Listen carefully; from now on I am not in Nagadapur."

"Ugh, then where in the hell are you?"

"May be in Timbuktu."

Begum liked that. "But you are just before my lovely eyes."

"You nitwit, halfwit, dodo! When did I tell you that I am not in Nagadapur?"

"But…"

"Just imagine."

"What?"

"That I am in Timbuktu."

"OK, you are in Timbuktu. Now what?"

"If anyone comes looking for me, tell him, I am not here, clear?"

"Absolutely."

"Now tell me, what's the menu for lunch?"

"Chicken lollipops," said Begum sniffing the aroma in the air. "Cooked in pure ghee with a touch of saffron and lots of dry fruits."

"Pass me a plateful here."

"How could I?" She said innocently, "You are in Timbuktu, my dear."

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr!" He growled.

"Nawab Saab." Sher Singh called from the front yard. "Are you at home?"

Nawab Rangile crouched further under the bed. Begum had to reply, "He left early today."

"For Tabla Ganj?"

"No, for Timbuktu."

"What...what did you say?"

"Timbuktu," she repeated aloud. "Timbuktu..."

"How come I get the whiff of his scent here?"

"Don't you believe me?" She lost her temper, "...come inside and ask him personally."

Nawab Rangile felt like banging his head on the floor. As he crawled out from under the bed, Sher Singh entered. "There you are!"

"To welcome my dear friend," Nawab Saab said getting to his feet, "I had to return from the Timbuktu of my dream and be here. Say, what brings you here?"

"Just to know, what are your plans to trap the old man?"

He mocked, "Have you ever heard of a lion planning a strategy to catch a rat?"

"Certainly not, but you will have to."

"Some fresh trouble?"

"Breaking News," Sher Singh announced like a channel news reader. "The old man caught a tiger and a leopard with his bare hands and knotted their tails. Young and old, men and women, all are gathered in the village square to watch the fun."

Nawab Rangile's chest caved in. Before he could think of something to save his skin, Kallu Kulhadi dashed in. "Nawab Saab...Nawab Saab..."

"Yes...?"

"Nawab Saab...Nawab Saab..."

"I know, you have kept my grave ready."

"Holy cow, that I forgot completely." Kallu took a deep breath and continued. "But that can wait. Get set, he is coming."

"Who is coming?"

"The terror. TB has whispered in his ears that you are Jack the giant killer, that you have accepted the challenge to send him to hell."

Having done his duty to inform Nawab Saab, Kallu turned and bolted for the cemetery. Sher Singh too was a born runner, no less than any Olympic champ. Within seconds he also vanished from the battlefield. Nawab Rangile was left alone staring blankly at the door.

"My soul-mate, my queen of heart, my sweetest tart!" Slipping once again under the bed, he said a bit emotionally to Begum. "The time has come to ask for your pardon. My end is near."

By now Begum Rangili had grasped the situation thoroughly. So she commented, "Here, take my bangles!"

"Ah!"

"Are you a man or a mouse?"

"Err..."

"Come out and face death!"

"That I will," he said sheepishly, crouching further inside. "I am prepared to sacrifice my life for you but..."

"But what?"

"Who will take care of you? Every night who will sing a lullaby to you? Who will dance and play hide and seek with you? Who will take you on the bike to see the fair? Who will get bangles...?"

Begum could not help giggling aloud.

"Here I am sweating all over and you are laughing?"

"Because I have the key to your freedom."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, you tell me, who gave you that herb?"

Like a turtle, Nawab Rangile pulled out his head from under the bed

and stared at her, thinking. Soon the memory cells in his brain started working. He remembered. Yesterday, Dahad Ali had dropped in early in the morning.

He was the headman of Tabla Ganj, which was in Pakistan.

Whenever the roosters of Tabla Ganj went on lightening strike, Dahad Ali crossed the border and came to Nagadapur in search of eggs.

Nawab Saab had given him two dozen eggs. In return Dahad Ali had generously offered him a miracle herb. "Even if an old man of 101 boils Jing-Jang in milk and drinks it, he will become young again." Dahad Ali had boasted.

Though Nawab Saab was sixty plus, he always considered himself to be younger then the youngest. The magic-herb was of no use to him. So he passed it over to old man.

"Now try to recollect..." Begum continued, "What did Dahad Ali say when he offered you the herb?"

'What had he said?' With the question, he remembered the answer too. 'The effect of the Jing-Jang will last only for twenty-four hours,' Dahad Ali had added in the end.

Nawab Rangile gladly crawled out from under the bed, placed one hand around Begum and started disco dancing. "Hai Allah," Begum said shyly. "If some one sees us..."

"So what?" Nawab Saab giggled like a baby. "You are my lawful Begum, not a run away wife. I have a right to dance with you as I like. Say, how about *Kathakali, Manipuri, Paanipuri, Bhelpuri*..."

"Talk sense, *miya*!"

"OK, look at the clock." Seriously he asked. "How much time left for the effect of the herb to cool down?"

Before she could look at the wall clock and say that just half an hour was left, she saw through the window the terror coming in their direction. She froze. With a bang Nawab Saab shut the door.

Now what? He had no answer, no where to go. So he opened the cupboard and sneaked in. Just a slit was kept open to get some fresh air.

'Wow, what a safe haven on earth!'

Within a few seconds the father of all terrorists, the old man, arrived. He did not bother to knock on the door. He simply kicked the door open.

"Where is that chicken-heart? Where has he chickened out?" he asked Begum Rangili, who was trembling from head to foot behind the kitchen door. She could not utter a word.

"Can't you hear me? Where is that chickengunia, who dared to challenge me?"

"He...he just left by the back door."

"Liar!" roared the old man. "Before I entered, I had bolted the back door from out side. Now speak the truth or I will huff and I will puff and I will blow this house down, and find that dot of a chickenpox!"

Chicken-heart...

Chickengunia...

Chickenpox...

Nawab Saab could not bear any more 'chicken', not even chicken *biryani*. He stepped out from the cupboard like a victor and said pompously, "Mr. Rooster, you are talking to the son of a gun, His Highness Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile, mightier than the mightiest."

For a moment the old man was simply bowled out. He stared at him bewildered. The time was ripe to throw yet another bomb. Nawab Saab declared, "To you I have given youth and I will put you back in your right place too. Say, how would you like to fight?"

"Ah!" This was a new shock for the old man.

"Indian style? WWW American style? Taliban style? Free style or you would prefer to go for *Panda ka Funda*?"

The old man got confused. He knew various styles of fighting, but *Panda ka Funda* was a riddle to him. Nawab Saab solved it. "*Panda ka Funda* means non-violent combat. Like two Pandas of Varanasi, we sit face to face eating *laddoos*. If I eat more than you, I will be called Braveheart and you will be chickenpox. If you eat more than me...err...you agree?"

The old man was quite hungry. He instantly agreed to it. Begum got busy. She spread the mat and placed two dinner plates, one for each Panda. Then she brought a container full of fifty *laddoos* from the sweet-seller and placed it in the middle of the mat. Now she glanced at the wall clock. Still there were twenty minutes to go.

"Mr. Old Man," Nawab Rangile was in full form. "Who will start this duel?"

"If I begin, nothing will be left for you," commented the old man, "Better you have a couple of *laddoos* before I pounce on them."

"Thanks for your kindness," picking up a *laddoo* from the container, Nawab said humbly. "Now start counting."

"One," the old man said aloud.

Nawab Saab finished the first *laddoo* in seconds and picked up another one.

"Two."

Taking *laddoos* one after the other, Nawab Saab kept on eating them with relish and praising them to the sky, "Ah, how delicious, how mouthwatering these *laddoos* are!" Now he turned towards the kitchen door and added, "Begum, don't forget to give my compliments to the *halwai* when you go to the market." Begum smiled coyly.

After gobbling ten *laddoos*, Nawab Saab drank a glass of water.

"Finished?" The old man asked hopefully.

Nawab Saab got irritated and fired him, "Did I burp?"

"No."

"Did I fart?"

"No."

"That means only the tasting part is over."

"What do you mean?"

"The real eating will start now."

"Ah!" The old man expressed the first sign of his power decreasing. He was feeling rather weak. Begum kept glancing at the wall clock repeatedly. Still ten minutes to go.

Fifteen more *laddoos* went down Nawab Rangile's throat and disappeared into his belly. Once again he picked up the glass of water. 'Finished...?' Before the oldie could ask once again, he explained, "This is just an interval." He drank the water and added, "I have yet to eat fifteen more."

The old man's jaw dropped. For Nawab Rangile, the hint was obvious. The Oldie was about to be bowled over. His time was up. Soon twenty four hours would be over. "My dear super man, you look famished." Nawab Saab felt tickled as he said with respect, "No need to wait for me to finish. Go ahead..."

The old man picked up a *laddoo* and started eating like any other old man. When he had finished half, he started coughing. "Here, take some water," Nawab Rangile offered him a glass. "Take an interval."

"No need for a break," said the old man, just like any other old man. "My film ends here."

And the young man of 99 turned back into the old man of 99 just as twenty four hours got over.

SCORPIONS AND SNAKES

Finally the election dates were announced and the quiet, peaceful village of Nagadapur woke up all of a sudden. Since *ustad* Ghazab Ali's *akhada* was in Nagadapur, it too started humming with life. The topic of discussion amongst the body builders was: the selection of a new symbol for the coming elections.

"Last time our party flag was a green flag adorned with moon and stars. Though all the Muslims voted for us, not a single Hindu voted in our favour." Mullah Ali Wali lamented addressing all the heavy weight members of his camp.

"In that case," Ghazab Ali came forward, "this time we will have an owl, the *ulloo*, as our symbol."

"*Ulloo*?"

"Because every one knows that amongst birds and animals, the owl is the wisest," he argued. "Not only that, the word *ulloo* is used with utter joy by both, the Hindus and Muslims alike."

"You smartaleck *ulloo*," Mullah lost his cool, "you want to make a laughing stock of us all?"

As Ghazab Ali stepped back, another body builder got up with a suggestion, "I have got a brilliant idea."

"And what is that?" Mullah asked.

"A master symbol that will compel even the members of Hanuman Akhada to cast votes in our favour."

"And what's that?"

"*Langot*. The favourite underwear of wrestlers all over India, Pakistan

and Bangladesh, the *langot*."

Mullahji glared at him like a hungry tiger. He sat down dejected. Now it was the turn of the third wrestler. He declared confidently, "If not the owl, nor the *langot*, then let it be a shoe."

"Why a shoe?" Mullah was curious.

"You see, every one loves to use it whenever the occasion arises," he said proudly. "Our people of Nagadapur are past masters at throwing it. A husband uses it on his better half, the bitter half uses it on her husband; a father uses it on his son, the son uses it on the father; teachers use it on students, students use it on teachers; the public throw it at leaders and leaders, by god, how they would love to use it on the public! This symbol is equally popular with young and old, and all generations. I will not be surprised if Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, Buddhists and Jains, all vote for the shoe."

The Mullah was really amazed, not because it was an intelligent suggestion, but because it had come from the chicken-brain of a wrestler. The symbol was accepted unanimously.

In the other camp Pandit Makhanlal was also dealing with the same problem. In the last elections, they had chosen a saffron flag with *trishul* as their party flag. Though every Hindu had gladly stamped on it, not a single Muslim endorsed it.

"The symbol should be such that the whole of Nagadapur should cherish it." Panditji clarified to his followers in Hanuman Akhada. "And...the *dalit* workers of the cotton mill should claim it as their own."

"Panditji," Pakodimal, the *ustaad* was quick to respond. "That is precisely the kind of symbol I have in mind."

"Out with it."

"Donkey."

"Who... me?"

"No! I mean the ass as our election symbol."

"Why ass, you jackass?" Panditji asked again.

"Why not?" He explained. "An ass is a very-very hard working, useful animal, handy for every household. You see, I learnt that when I was in primary school."

"A pajama would be far-far-far better symbol than a donkey," another

body builder suggested.

Yet another commented, "What is so great about a pajama?"

"My foot," the fourth one was ready with an answer.

"Foot!" Panditji grabbed the idea as he beamed with a sugar coated smile. "What better symbol could we have than The Foot? A great man has rightly said—it is our birth right to use our foot and trip others."

"And may we know," someone asked. "Who is that great man?"

"Me, of course," Panditji replied gladly. "If you have any doubt, visit any government office with work and you will find, on every step some one is there waiting to trip you over. Please also note, the pleasure we get in tripping others is undoubtedly ecstatic."

The new election symbol of Pandit Makhanlal's party was finalised. Posters of the FOOT were printed in thousands. Soon they appeared on walls and jeeps with blaring horns and screeching slogan shouting were seen crawling up and down the lanes.

When 99-not out saw ten posters of FOOT in a row, he inquired. "Whose foot is that?"

Panditji, who was passing by in a jeep stopped and replied, "The Foot is a symbol of national integration too. May be, one of these feet is yours."

When the old man turned, a row of shoes confronted him. This wall was covered with SHOE posters. "And whose symbol is this SHOE?" he asked. Mullahji had stopped his jeep in front of a *paan-bidi* shop. When the question hit his eardrums, it became imperative for him to reply.

He emitted a red jet of *paan* from his mouth and said, "Shoe is a symbol of power. Bigger the shoe, bigger the nation. Shoes can be used in so many ways, in various places, in all seasons. Anybody can use it—journos throw shoes at politicians. Don't you forget, a friend in journey—shoe. A friend in need—shoe. Husband of sandal, brother of slipper and son of boot—the shoe! Every one's friend, the new trend—shoe. Our shoe, your shoe. Your vote, our shoe."

Mullahji delivered the speech with such force that all the people gathered at the village square, including the wise old man, gave him a thunderous applause. That irked Pandit Makhanlal. He got up, stood on the bonnet of his jeep, thrust his mouth into the large, funnel shaped megaphone and launched his official election speech:

"My dear brothers and sisters, before you choose a cobbler to cast your valuable vote, ask yourself—after all what is a shoe for? You will get just one and only one answer. If there is a foot, there is a shoe. No foot, no shoe."

No one was trying to pull him down, yet he pleaded, "Please... allow me to say a few words to my Muslim brothers, shoes are not allowed inside the mosques. The right place for it is under a foot. Every foot wears it out and throws it away. So be wise, choose our FOOT for your valuable vote."

Mullah Ali Wali was stunned, but only for a few seconds. He turned his megaphone cone towards Panditji and charged, "It is true that the place of a shoe is under the foot, just as the place of a disciple is at his guru's feet, just as the place of a god-fearing wife is at her husband's feet. Indeed the shoe is a symbol of humility, modesty, politeness, never ever a weakness, feebleness or faintness."

No one was trying to block his din, yet he pleaded, "Please... allow me to remind my Hindu brothers that when the great disciple Gorakhnath rises, the feet of the guru Machindernath start trembling. When a Nagadapuri woman gets furious like *Kaali*, all the men, high and mighty start meowing like kittens."

Although no one had kicked his butt, he continued, "Please...let me finish...the shoe is not just a weapon, it is a missile too. Like a baton, you can hold it in your hand and hammer your enemy or throw it like a bomb and hit him hard. However strong a foot may be, it will vanish in seconds. Let me make it more clear, the foot is a symbol of dictatorship. Hitler put his foot down and tried to trip the whole world. What was the result? He was crushed by the mighty shoe of friendly nations. Think, friends think, what do you want? A ruthless dictator-foot or an all loving democratic-shoe?"

Panditji with his followers yelled in unison:

Foot foot foot!

Mullahji roared with his followers:

Shoe shoe shoe!

The village square was divided immediately into two camps. Election fever seemed to have gripped them all. Everyone behaved as if possessed

by some spirit. The slogan shouting became hot and shrill.

Foot Foot Foot...

Shoe Shoe Shoe...

The tension mounted—moment to moment. It needed only a spark to explode. Just then some one used his foot and tripped a shoe-lover. Kallu Kulhadi saw that and dashed towards the cemetery. It was essential for him to keep at least half a dozen graves ready before knives and swords were pulled out to taste blood. If SP Bandukilal had not appeared on the scene in time and fired in the air, Kallu's labour would not have gone waste.

"Leaders and followers," the SP addressed them all in proper election manners. "If any footloose tries to disturb the peace of Nagadapur by tripping others or hammering shoes, I will be forced to use my gun. Let the whole village cry from the rooftop that the men in khaki are devils in disguise, I care a hoot. Clap!"

As he opened his jaws wide to say the last word aloud, someone from the crowd threw an egg. Surprisingly it went right inside his mouth. The crowd roared and rolled with laughter. But it was not the time for fun and frolic. At least for some, the situation was dead serious. The problem in each camp was what?

How to humble the enemy? How to bag the maximum number of votes? There were heavy discussions going on in Hanuman Akhada. Panditji was cent per cent sure that every Hindu was going to cast a vote in his favour but that not a single Muslim was going to come forward to support him.

"Oh, yes..." Pakodimal, the *ustad* suggested, "To get those bedbug's votes, we will have to come out with some ingenious gimmick." All the big, fat, chicken brains of Hanuman Akhada, including the computer brain Pandit Makhanlal, got busy digging up new strategies.

In the other *akhada* of Ghazab Ali *ustaad*, the discussion had turned into a disaster. Mullah Ali Wali was facing a similar problem: all the Muslim votes were in his pocket but no hope of getting a single Hindu vote.

"Oh, yes..." Ghazab Ali suggested, "To get those mosquito's votes, we will have to invent some crafty idea."

"What are you waiting for?" Mullahji tried to boost their sinking morale. "Use your brains if you have any. Come out with a shrewd ploy

so that can raise your head with pride and lower my neck with the burden of heavy garlands."

"I think I have got it!" Gazab Ali, the *ustaad* said after muddling his brain for a full ten minutes. "Tonight, we will give such a thorough thrashing to the members of Hanuman Akhada that they will not be able to even walk without crutches till the next elections."

Mullahji spat on the ground and showered a few select abuses on him. "You crack-brain, can't you think of anything beside violence? At least for once talk sense."

The *ustaad* was annoyed. He asked, "If a farmer thinks of his crop, will you call him crack-brain?"

"Of course not."

"Then, if a wrestler thinks of neck break skull crack, what is odd about it?"

"Everything, for the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi has taught us the most powerful lesson of life—non-violence. With the weapon of non-violence, we have attained freedom and to leave that path of truth and peace is to betray him." As he spoke, he suggested. "We will have to do some exceptional work to convince our Hindu brothers that we are their saviours."

"And what is that work?"

"If you can not think of it, invent it."

"Ha! Asking crack-brains to invent."

Ignoring his sarcasm, Mullahji hinted, "Across the border in Tabla Ganj, there are plenty of snakes and scorpions."

No one even got the inkling of the grand design to come.

"We collect about five hundred scorpions and set them loose in the Hindu Colony."

"Then…?"

"Then what? Within a couple of days the terror of the scorpions will start. But before the Hindus start migrating, we will launch catch a scorpion, win a prize campaign."

Ghazab Ali and his *chelas* were really impressed. Undoubtedly it was a brilliant strategy. This single move could easily turn the balance in Mullahji's favour. The sympathies of the entire Hindu community would

make a u-turn for the most compassionate candidate called Mullah Ali Wali.

The big headache was—how to get the scorpions? It was not advisable for Mullahji's followers to get involved in this racket for there was every possibility of the secret being leaked out. And, if the enemy came to know of it, then riots were sure to break out. Finally it was unanimously decided that this task should be entrusted to Nawab Jung Bahadur Rangile.

Nawab Saab was attending to his poultry in the front yard, when Ghazab Ali entered brushing his teeth with *datun*.

"What brings you here at dawn, my dear muscle man?" asked Nawab Saab, releasing the fowls from their cages.

"I had to choose this hour for our meeting."

"You mean secret...?"

"Absolutely confidential," he whispered twisting the *neem* twig from the middle to thrust it inside his mouth and clean the tongue. Then he continued, "We need five hundred scorpions."

"Whaaaat...what did you say?"

Ghazab Ali repeated the order. "Five-hundred-deadly-scorpions. Ask and you shell get your price."

"But what will you do with so many scorpions? Make *kebabs*?"

"Whether we make *kebabs* or cutlets," said Ghazab Ali irritated, "You are not concerned, get it?"

Nawab Saab nodded humbly and forwarded the rate card.

"What is this?"

"List of charges for hunting different animals."

Scratching his head, Ghazab Ali read... Top of the list was

Tiger : alive Rs. 10,000 only

Tiger : dead Rs. 8000 only

(Two hyenas free with a tiger dead or alive.)

The list was quite long. Right now Ghazab Ali was not interested in any other animal beside scorpions. He focused his eyes on the rate. They were really cheap. Dead or alive, one scorpion was priced at Rs.10 only. He offered Rs. 500 advance payment.

"Come tomorrow with the remaining amount." Nawab Saab told him after counting five notes of hundred each. "Your order will be ready."

Soon after Ghazab Ali left, Pakodimal, the other *ustaad* dropped in.

"My dear champ," Nawab Rangile said looking at him from head to foot. "I hope you have not lost your way!"

"The road is correct, the house number is correct and as a man of word, your track record is also correct."

"That is true."

"And that is why I am here to appeal..."

"For election fund?"

"Nope."

"Then..."

"We need five hundred snakes."

"Whaaaat...what did you say?"

Pakodimal repeated the order. "Five-hundred-poisonous-cobras. Ask and you shell get your price."

"But what will you do with so many snakes? Make pickle?"

"Whether we make pickle or *pakodas*," said Pakodimal irritated, "is not your concern, get it?"

Nawab Saab nodded humbly but did not present the rate card. He thought, these are election days. Money flows like a swollen river. The time is ripe to make a fast buck. Everyone is minting money. Why not me? Why not strike when the iron is hot?

According to the rate card, the rate of a serpent (including rattle snake and viper) was nineteen rupees and ninety-nine paisa. Breaking into a smile, Nawab Saab quoted twenty rupees flat. Take it or leave it.

The deal was sealed.

"Keep this thousand rupees advance." Pakodimal gave him ten notes of hundred rupees each with a warning. "But keep this deal to yourself, it is strictly confidential."

"I am an upright person." Nawab Saab reminded him after counting ten notes of hundred each. "Come tomorrow with the remaining amount. Your order will be ready."

So strong was the election fever that even Begum Rangili could not escape it.

"Do you hear me?" she yelled from the kitchen.

"My dear kitchen queen, do you think I am deaf?" Nawab Saab yelled

back, thinking of the total amount the two orders would fetch him. "Even today, my ears are sharp enough to hear the chatting of ants."

"Maybe, but your brain...it has gone down the drain."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever thought of contesting the elections?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Politics is not for gentlemen."

"That is why the country is going to the dogs."

"So?"

"Good people are badly needed in politics." Steadily Begum was coming to the point. "If you contest, once again we all could live in style."

"How?"

"Tell me, what is the difference between the lifestyle of a politician today and the *nawab's* of yester years?" Begum raised the question and answered it too. "The opulence, the fun and frolics *nawabs* used to have, is now enjoyed by the *netaas*."

"Interesting..." Nawab Saab's eyes sparkled, "but we do not have enough money to fight the election."

"Who is asking you to spend from your own pocket? Even Mullahji and Panditji don't do that."

"Then where do they get funds from?"

Begum was well aware of the village politics.

"We have a cotton mill on the outskirt of Nagadapur." She told him what she had gathered from the village square. "Its owner Jalim Singh gives huge donations for the election fund to both the camps. If you ask him, he will gladly fill your coffers too."

"Forget it; I can never go to his door with a begging bowl."

"Then whose door can you knock?"

"His, from whom Jalim Singh too asks."

"You mean..."

"Yes madam, I will ask from my merciful Allah."

Begum beat her head with her fist.

Soon after the noon prayers, Nawab Saab raised his hands to the roof and prayed aloud, "Ya Allah, you have known me all these years as a true

believer of Islam. And you are also aware that till this day I have never asked anything from you. But today, as a candidate from Nagadapur, I am compelled to beg for one *lakh* rupees. You see, that is the minimum amount needed to fight the elections here. Oh, the Almighty, if you could arrange that for me in twenty four hours, I will keep five percent aside for you."

Some time earlier, Dahad Ali, the *mukhia* from the other side of the border, Tabla Ganj, had arrived and was waiting in the front yard. He was amused to hear Nawab Saab's blaring prayer, as if God was deaf. Then he roared as usual, "*Namaaz* over, prayer over, now may I come in."

"Come straight in," Nawab Rangile welcomed him. "Seems, in Tabla Ganj, once again all the roosters have gone on strike and there is scarcity of eggs!"

"Your guess is nearly correct." So saying he added with a touch of humour, "Sometimes I feel that you people enjoy inciting our fowls."

Nawab Saab too gave him a fitting reply, "*Miya*, the day we will start fingering your poultry birds, they will not only stop giving eggs, they will simply stop living in Tabla Ganj."

Dahad Ali had a hearty laugh. Then he said, "Now let's talk business."

"Business! What business?"

"You don't want to sell eggs?"

"Of course not," Nawab Saab added generously, "for you, for my good old customer Miya Dahad Ali, today the eggs are free."

"Free!"

"Absolutely free."

"Unconditionally...?"

"Unconditionally, but there is a very-very small request."

Dahad Ali looked into his eyes to read the very-very fine print. Nawab Saab explained, "There is no dearth of snakes and scorpions in Tabla Ganj. You need eggs, we need those deadly reptiles. For one egg you will give me one scorpion. For one snake I will give you two eggs, agreed?"

Dahad Ali roared again, "Agreed."

The details were finalised. Dahad Ali returned home and asked his servant to arrange for five hundred snakes and scorpions by sunset. Now, this servant was a real lazy lump. He thought, who will dare to open the sacks to check whether they contain snakes and scorpions or not! So he

caught all the rats and mice from the fields and filled two sacks.

Late in the evening, both the sacks arrived at Nawab Rangile's house. One was labeled—scorpions, the other one was labeled—snakes. Nawab Saab was pleased to see the job done absolutely in such a professional manner.

At night when Ghazab Ali sneaked into the front yard, Nawab Saab handed him the sack labeled scorpions. What puzzled him was the other similar sack. He paid Nawab Saab the balance amount and asked, "What's that?"

"That is none of your business," said Nawab Saab sternly. "Get lost."

"But I am curious…"

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"I am no cat, I am a Bengal tiger. Now tell me, what stops you from calling an axe, an axe?"

"That sack contains five hundred poisonous cobras for Hanuman Akhada." Nawab Saab burst out, "But that is strictly confidential. Now you tell me, can I disclose that to anyone?"

"Of course not, not even me."

Ghazab Ali placed the sack on his back and rushed to the *akhada*. When he reached there panting, he found Mullah Ali Wali waiting for him impatiently with a gang of his eight pack followers. "The sky has fallen!" The *ustadji* wailed as he placed the sack on the ground. "We placed the order for five hundred scorpions; Panditji has ordered five hundred venomous cobras."

"Ah!" Mullahji felt the tremors within, "are you sure that…"

"Nawab Saab himself told me. I have seen the other sack, just like this with a label, with my own eyes."

Mullahji's brain began to tick-tock like a German clock. Within minutes he came out with a new strategy and delivered fresh orders. "Bury the sack."

"But…"

"We will go to the Police Station and report to the SP Bandukilal the conspiracy by the opposition to create tension between two peace loving, happy communities. Panditji will be arrested on the spot. If fortune favours us, he will be tried by the Fast Track Court and his name will be

automatically dropped from the candidate's list."

"Wow!" Ghazab Ali was thrilled, "this is what we wrestlers call the master stroke—break neck, skull crack, pulp maker blow."

Soon a hole was dug and the sack was neatly buried. Then Mullahji, accompanied by the SP Bandukilal went to the Hanuman Akhada.

Here, Panditji with his twelve pack followers, including Pakodimal, the great guru, were engrossed in deep thought. The sack labeled snakes was in the center. "SP Saab," Mullahji cried out with all his might. "Here is the enemy of the nation. Arrest him and dump him behind bars."

Panditji was shaken for a few moments, then he asked sarcastically with a smile, "What's the occasion?"

"You have lost the election even before contesting it and that calls for the celebration in prison." Once again Mullahji raised his voice, "What's there in that sack?"

"What could there be?"

"Don't pretend. We know your game," he yelled, turning towards the SP, "The sack contains deadly cobras. Panditji intends to let them loose in the Muslim settlements and create terror, hatred and sow the seeds of a riot."

"Panditji," now the SP had to open his mouth. "What's the truth?"

"See for yourself."

The SP was alarmed. Suppose he opened the sack and it really contained cobras... then... "Mullahji," he said turning towards him. "Seems you still have doubts. I allow you to open the sack and investigate."

Mullahji's heart started pounding. "Sir, I don't have any doubt," he mumbled hurriedly, I am absolutely certain."

"Not me," argued the SP. "If I have to arrest Panditji, I have to be on sure ground."

"Then why don't you open the sack and look inside?"

"Gentlemen," Panditji got up from his place and declared humbly, "Allow me to be of service to you."

He turned the mouth of the sack towards Mullahji and opened it. A number of rats jumped out and attacked whatever came in their way. Of course Mullahji was the biggest hurdle. So they pounced on him also, but he was faster than the mice. In fact he ran so fast that he never turned to

glance back even once at the laughing crowd.

Nawab Rangile had given twenty four hours notice to God. For the last twenty three hours, he had prayed for the election funds after every Namaz. But the most merciful, the most compassionate Allah seemed to have gone suddenly stone deaf. So far He had not dropped a single coin in his begging bowl.

Nawab Saab looked at the ceiling again and realized, it was intact. Now, how could Allah drop even a coin if he wanted to? It's a common knowledge, when Santa Claus wants to bestow his favours, he prefers chimney. When Allah wants to bestow His favours; He sends it through a hole in the ceiling. Since Allah had to attend to trillions of matter each day, how would he have time to do a carpenter's job to pull apart the roof?

The night before, Nawab Saab had called in Kallu Kulhadi to do exactly that. Kallu, the jack of all trades, had made a big hole in the center of the ceiling and left. Now this was the final hour. Nawab Saab offered morning prayers and raised his hands for the last time:

"O King of Kings and the Emperor of the universe, hardly a few minutes are left now." He was not happy at all complaining, but was helpless. "Please note, after the deadline is over, I won't accept anything—underline it—not even in dollars, not even in gold. No joke, I am a man of words. It's final. Now it's a question of your reputation. Are you listening? Your honour, your grace and your five per cent are at stake. Then don't complain, why did I turn away from the mosque! Watch it, you have asked for it."

Just then, a heavy sack fell on Nawab Saab's head from the gaping hole in the ceiling. He collapsed instantly. When he regained consciousness, what he saw stunned him. Bundles and bundles of hundred rupee notes were peeping from the sack. Some were scattered on the floor. He screamed:

"Begum!"

She was in the kitchen. "Are you mad? Have I become deaf? What's the matter with you, my dear?"

Nawab Saab continued, "V is for victory…"

Begum Rangili came out. What she witnessed was a miracle! Nawab Rangile was jumping and dancing, throwing crisp notes all around and showering them on her like a real *Moghal* king.

V is for victory… Jai ho!

THE WITTY GOD

Its true—Faith can move mountains, but Begum Rangili could not believe her eyes. In this twenty first century, can such miracles happen? One moment she gaped at the hole in the roof; the next, her eyes would scan the floor covered with bundles of crisp bank notes.

"What are you staring at with your eyes and mouth wide open like a cave entrance?" Nawab Saab crowed proudly. "Not a paisa more, not a paisa less, exactly one lakh. After all, who had warned Him? Now you will have to believe, my ultimatum has some weight."

"I…I am confused!"

Nawab Saab explained, "In this *kalyug*, there is only one real friend of Allah left and that is me. If I start sulking then who will love Him? Who will sing and dance in His praise? Who will address Him as The Emperor of Both the Worlds? This is what must have pricked him and that is why he rushed the delivery order."

Begum was still looking at him like an idiot when he commanded: "Get set, now!"

"For what?" She was alert.

"For elections."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Make *halwa-puri* for the whole village."

"Ha!"

"On election day we will feed all the villagers." Nawab Saab was racing with the words. "See that, along with almonds, pistachios and saffron, pure ghee is liberally used."

Begum kept on looking blankly and Nawab Saab rushed out. Before starting the election campaign, it was essential to consult two dear friends—Sher Singh and Kallu Kulhadi. Sher Singh had gone to the fields. It was not possible to meet him, but Kallu was available in the cemetery.

He had kept about a dozen graves dug and ready. After this tough, perspiring job, he was resting under a tree, smoking his *chillum.*

The moment he saw Nawab Saab coming, he generously offered. "Choose!"

"Choose what?"

"Any one of these designer graves."

"But I am perfectly alive!"

"That's why you are getting this golden opportunity to choose." Kallu recommended, taking one more puff from his *chillum*, "How about that round one under the laburnum tree?"

"I said I am not in hurry."

"No body is in hurry, but in these days of thundering speeches and hate-campaigns, time moves fast. Death moves faster. Suddenly bodies drop dead on either side. Maybe one of them will be yours." Then he added, "how about this hexagonal one? It's for the first time in India, or would you prefer that triangular one with three aloevera plants around it? They are really good for health."

Nawab Saab felt depressed. He asked, "What has death got to do with elections?"

"That is beyond you to understand."

"Then how will I fight the elections?"

"Holy cow! Are you also going to jump in the fray?"

"That is what my Allah wants."

"What do you mean?"

"Simple," Nawab Saab explained, "Allah has donated a sack full of bank notes for my election campaign."

"R...really?"

"Now our first task is to find an election symbol for our party."

Kallu forgot his *chillum* and plunged into deep thought. For a few moments he sat like a poet laureate looking at the sky. Then all of a sudden he looked down and said, "Got it, I got it!"

"What?"
"The symbol."
"What?"
"A Corpse."
"Ugh..."
"A faceless corpse, the symbol of secularism also."
"Can't you think of something better?"
"This is the best." Kallu was not one to give up so easily. "It is one symbol that we all, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian respect. And remember, we all love it too. That is why we all shed tears for the dead. Don't you remember, a few months back, when there was a rumour about your death, how the whole village had cried and sobbed and wailed and wept?"

In spite of all these power packed arguments, Nawab Saab could not accept it. "What you say makes sense," he expressed. "But a corpse..." Before he could finish, Kallu jumped on to a *pucca* grave and started dancing with his axe shouting slogans.

All the religions
Respect the dead
Vote for Corpse
If you have a head

Sher Singh, who had received Nawab Saab's message, was passing by. Fascinated, he was watching Kallu Kulhadi yelling and doing the salsa on a grave. "What's the matter, Nawab Saab? Whose corpse is he raising?"

Nawab Saab explained Kallu's suggestion in brief before Kallu jumped down and landed right in front of Sher Singh.

"Shera, tell me the truth," he said excitedly. "Aren't we all born to die sooner or later?"

"That is the eternal truth." Replied Sher Singh, glancing at the freshly dug odd shaped graves. "And a few are destined to die in this election fever."

"Then what is wrong with my suggestion, the corpse as an election symbol?"

"Everything, for nobody wants to die. Not even the wise old man 99-not out." Sher Singh explained patiently. "And yet, if our Nawab Saab chooses such a lousy symbol, the result will be disastrous. He will become

the laughing stock of the whole village. On top of that, his nose, the symbol of honour, will be cut to pieces."

"The nose!" Nawab Saab blurted out.

"Got slashed?" Kallu tried to be funny.

"No," announced Nawab Saab with confidence. "Our party's symbol—the nose!"

"Nose…!" Sher Singh echoed.

"The nose of our Nagadapur," Nawab Saab continued, "is the nose of India. The nose of Amitabh Bachchan is the nose of Bollywood. The nose of Sonia Gandhi is the nose of Delhi. The darling of all, taller than the tall—the nose." Then all three yelled together:

Save your Nose
From fundamentalist
From terrorist
From politicians
Vote for Nose

When the shoe-camp and the foot-camp members saw posters of The Nose on every nook and corner, gloom descended on them like heavy monsoon clouds. The reason was simple. Pandit Makhanlal was contesting with the hope of securing all Hindu votes. Mullah Ali Wali was depending on only Muslim votes. But Nawab Rangile was the beloved of every heart, Hindu or Muslim, Sikh or Christian, man or woman.

That night, Mullahji gathered all his front line followers and placed before them the new problem. "Undoubtedly, our votes will be divided badly. The estimate is, more than sixty per cent. Now, the big question is—how to stop that, how to hold our fort tight."

"The question also is…" Ghazab Ali commented, "How to demolish the enemy's fort?"

"And the question also is," another one added, "Who is our real enemy, Pandit Makhanlal or Nawab Rangile?"

"The enemy number one…" Mullahji said gritting his teeth, "That cursed Nawab Rangile. His fort is so strong that even an army of hundred elephants will fail to loosen a single brick. We better think of some new strategy."

The walls of Hanuman Akhada were also shaken badly. Enemy number

one of Pandit Makhanlal was also Nawab Rangile. In the battlefield of elections, nobody had the guts to face him openly. What was the alternative? How to create a new vote-bank?

Vote-bank!

An idea struck him after some hard thinking. All the workers of the cotton mill on the outskirt of Nagadapur were Dalits. They always voted for a candidate, carefully chosen by their leader Dukhiram en-bloc. And the same candidate unfailingly disappeared after winning the election.

Now, with election-fever picking up once again all the candidates were planning to dupe Dukhiram once again. Though it was not that easy, Pandit Makhanlal saw a ray of hope. In fact he had no choice but to woo the Dalit leader by hook or crook. Even at the risk of being cast out, he had no option but to grab all the votes of the Dalit colony.

Lo and behold, the miracle of Bajarang Bali, Dukhiram was standing at the gate of Hanuman Akhada with folded hands, asking for permission to enter.

As it was, Panditji could never stand the site of him. Ugh...! But during election time all values, likes and dislikes change. You dare not call a spade a spade. So you call the donkey, scholar *pandit* and the rat, meow-meow *mullah*.

Pandit Makhanlal sprung from his seat and welcomed him with a sunny smile. "Think of the angel and there he is!" He said warmly, "I was just thinking of visiting you."

"Glad to know that you people remember us at least once every five years."

It was like a slap on his face, yet he grinned like a monkey and added, "My dear Dukhiram, believe me, I always think of you as my brother and I always have your interests at heart."

"You wanted to see me, for what?"

"Just to give some friendly advice. You know that cunning fox called Mullahji, beware of him. He will first convince you, then convert you and then make a terrorist out of you. But I am confident; your people won't succumb to his carrots because they have a great leader, you, to guide them."

"If you join hands with us, we won't succumb to anybody's carrot."

Now this was a very-very positive signal from the Dalit leader and Panditji responded accordingly. "I said, you are my brother and in festivities and funerals, in boom-time and depression, a brother is always with the brother—how much?"

"What?"

"I said how much do you need?"

"We don't need cash."

"I can give you a cheque also if you want—ten thousand?"

"I mean, we don't need money."

Panditji thought, 'Dukhiram looks simple, but he is a hard nut to crack. I will have to raise the offer'. "Fifty thousand cash on table and a trip to Delhi by air for two."

Now Dukhiram came to the point. Tomorrow, all the cotton mill workers were expected to go on an indefinite strike. He wanted Panditji's party to support them.

Panditji felt the ground underneath sinking. How could he support the striking mill-workers, when he was receiving a large sum of money from the mill-owner, to fight the elections? He would be doomed even if he thought of it!

Next, Dukhiram, visited *ustaad* Ghazab Ali's *akhada.* When he was at the gate with folded hands, seeking permission to enter, Mullah Ali Wali's feet danced all the way to receive him. As if his dead father had dropped in from heaven above to wish him luck, he hugged Dukhiram thrice and said, "I knew it, I knew it in my bones…"

"What?"

"That you won't be fooled by the fraud who calls himself *pandit.* The whole world knows that his party is dead against lower caste people entering the temple and also taking water from the village well. Of course in the name of Rama, that *sarkari-sant* will offer you the moon before the elections and deliver a kick on your bum after." Then Mullahji asked softly, "How much? Five thousand rupees… fifteen… fifty… a *lakh* in cash with two AK-47s? On top of that, a trip to Agra by car for the whole family. After the trip the car is yours."

Dukhiram, the Dalit leader, squarely placed his problem before him also and asked for his support. Mullahji too felt the ground under him

sinking. His head started reeling. He was also getting a large sum of tax-free money from the mill owner to fight the elections. He was no nitwit to cut the branch of a tree on which he was sitting.

But Nawab Rangile had received his election funds directly from the almighty Himself, he was not under anybody's obligation. When Dukhiram entered his house, he offered him a chair and listened to his plea attentively.

"My dear Dukhiram," in the end he said firmly. "Me, my party and my Allah are with the workers. As long as justice is not done, the strike will continue."

"Thanks for your prompt decision." Dukhiram was grateful, "but how will the workers survive if the strike continues for long?"

"During the strike period," Nawab Saab puffed up his chest and declared. "My party will treat the workers daily with chicken biryani and vegetable *pulao* with *jalebi*. After all, the honourable nose of workers is our nose too."

A broad smile spread on Dukhiram's face, making him Sukhiram.

Mullah Ali Wali's face turned ashen. When he got the news that the NOSE famed Nawab Rangile had grabbed all the votes of the Dalit workers, he felt like diving into a swimming pool without water and get his big potato nose smashed into mesh.

"What's the matter, Mullahji?" From the window of his house, Pandit Makhanlal had noticed the shades of depression on his face. "How come your nose looks flat like *papad*?"

"May be, at least it is there." Mullahji gave a befitting reply from the neighboring window. "But I hardly see any trace of nose on your face!"

"If your SHOE fits in our FOOT, it will definitely reappear!"

Mullahji's eyes flickered for a few seconds and then became wide and clear with sparkles. Panditji had hinted at cease-fire, a no-war pact. Just a nod was needed from the *papad* nose for them to hug each other.

Now, this is also an important rule in politics. When two enemies are confronted with the same danger, they should become friends, pool their forces together and fight the common devil with all their might.

Mullahji smiled before offering his hand. "Panditji, we have made such a flexible shoe that it can fit any size."

Two arch enemies of yester years, Pandit Makhanlal and Mullah Ali Wali, today became friends. By overworking their brains day and night, together they worked out a brilliant but a malicious blueprint to send Nawab Saab to the gallows. To begin with, at any cost, the fair name of Nawab Rangile must be tarnished. That would reduce his popularity and split his votes.

For this dirty job Tayyabali Bohri, popularly known as TB, the most cunning enemy of Nawab Rangile, was chosen. He hated Nawab Saab, his laughter, his Begum, even his roosters with chicks that did a chick-chick here and a chick-chick there, here a chick, there a chick, everywhere a chick-chick.

The reason for this deep rooted animosity was obvious. Young or old, everyone was fond of Nawab Saab but nobody bothered to cast even a glance at him. He was so jealous of Nawab Saab's fame that his heart simmered round the clock like a wet twig in a hearth.

On hearing Nawab Saab's praises, TB growled like a dog seeing a cat. Then he would mumble pulling his own hair in rage—'Every dog has his day. Let my time come and I will make American pizza of him and relish it with Pakistani poppadam and Chinese chatni.'

Now, Sher Singh and Kallu Kulhadi had willingly taken upon themselves the full responsibility of Nawab Rangile's election campaign. There was not a single lane where the NOSE posters were not displayed. But as Election Day was coming closer, the number of NOSE posters began to increase as rapidly as the population of India. Now NOSE billboards began to appear on *havelis* and tall houses.

It is common knowledge that the last week of any election campaign is called the period of poster-war. In the morning wherever the FOOT posters appeared, by evening they were covered by the SHOE. During the night, mill workers would come and neatly stick NOSE posters over it. Just a week earlier the mill-strike had ended in a grand success. So, all the workers had gladly become volunteers of the NOSE party.

Day and night jeeps of all the parties crawled through the lanes and by lanes, with their horns blaring. The cacophony of sounds pestered the villagers even at night also. The sounds of horns...The sounds of slogan shouting...The sounds of speeches...

"My dear brothers and sisters," Nawab Rangile was addressing his election rally from the stage. "Do you know why did I decide to contest this election?" The crowd roared together:

Noooooooo!

Nawab Saab continued, "There are two reasons for it. First, it is Allah's wish that I contest. Secondly, I want every child in Nagadapur to eat at least one *malai-kulfi* a day." Half the audience in Nawab Saab's rally

consisted of children. The effect of the promise of special ice-cream got a thunderous applause.

"I want every young man in Nagadapur to have five star meals twice a day." Now it was the turn of the young blood to clap. "And...each senior citizen in Nagadapur should get *rabadi-puri* thrice a day." All the old folks, including the wise old man 99-not out applauded with blessings.

"Perhaps you would be thinking, from where are we to get all these..." Nawab Saab continued his speech, "Well, hard work is the answer. All of us will work together and with Nagadapur, we will take India too on the path of progress and prosperity."

Nawab Saab had hardly finished his speech when TB emerged on the stage like a genie. He had a big megaphone in his hand. Holding it close to his mouth, he barked into it. "This nabob is telling all lies!"

For a moment there was uneasy silence. Then, people started throwing rotten eggs, potatoes and tomatoes at TB. But his feet remained glued to the ground. "Don't be fooled by this clown's sweet talk," he continued, "The so called nabob is a secret agent of Pakistan."

Now, in some people's brain a few questions popped up—*how could it be possible? How could such a patriotic person like Nawab Rangile turn traitor?* Some one from the crowd got up and asked, "Do you have any proof that our Nawab Saab is spying for the enemy?"

That is what TB wanted. That was the question he was waiting for. He gladly replied, "Isn't it true that Dahad Ali, the headman of Tabla Ganj is his intimate friend? Can any one deny that on the pretext of buying eggs, Dahadali comes across the border often to collect information?"

Then he disclosed some 'technique' of how this was done: Nawab Saab drills a hole in the egg, takes out the content and inserts a slip with secret information into the shell of the egg. Dahadali buys those eggs, puts them at the bottom of the basket and then fills up the basket with real eggs. Now who can suspect him walking away happily to Tabla Ganj?

"Gentlemen, once again you will raise the question—proof?"

TB was continuously blabbering, "well, here is the proof." From his pocket he took out an egg and held it high for every one to see. "Last night, I have stolen it from Nawab Saab's house. It contains a note. I hand over this precious egg to Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* and his team of five

senior citizens. Now it is up to them to decide, who is real and who is fake! Who is a swan and who is a crow!"

The crowd forgot *malai-kulfi* and *rabadi-puri*. Once again rotten eggs started flying, potatoes and tomatoes were seen aimed towards the stage. But the target had changed. Nawab Rangile's feet trembled. Still he stood firm like a real soldier facing the bombardment of soiled vegetables and even shoes.

Pandit Makhanlal and Mullah Ali Wali were sitting at the far end of the crowd. They smiled to themselves and patted each other pleased. Their dirty move had hit the bull's-eye. Their crooked design was a grand success. Chances of Nawab Saab being hung were bright.

Sher Singh, who stood a few feet away watching them, could not miss seeing their wicked smiles. He realised there was more to this then meets the eye. The move was not ordinary. It was an extraordinarily cunning move. He was thinking hard and fast. To checkmate the opponents, he thought of a new idea and disappeared from the scene for a few minutes.

In the meanwhile, at the meeting, Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* broke the egg and took out a slip of paper. On it was written a fake message: My dear Dahadali, we are running short of funds for the elections. Send immediately two lakhs more.

Pukar Singh's eyes became wide-screen. With those cinemascope eyes he glared at Nawab Rangile. Nawab Saab had the power of truth. He stood firm with his chest out, not afraid of anybody, not even Yama, the god of death. TB had a smirk on his face.

Pukar Singh started the interrogation. "Nawab Saab..."

"Yes *mukhiaji*."

"Whatever you are asked, you will tell the truth and nothing but the truth."

"Truth is my religion."

"Now tell us, from where did you get rupees one lakh for the election fund?" Pukar Singh fired the first salvo.

"From Allah."

"You mean to say that your Allah gave your party funds to fight elections?"

"Of course," Nawab Saab replied promptly. Then added, "Usually He

breaks the roof open, but this time Kallu did the job and my Allah dropped the money bag."

The committee of five seniors looked at each other quizzically. The SP Bandukilal too was present on the stage, and even his brains also got knocked off the stumps seeing the slip with the message. On top of that, when he heard Nawab Saab's illogical reply, his right hand wanted to spank Mr. Truth. In this era of science and technology, who could believe such a ridiculous explanation?

"You!" The SP thundered getting up from his chair. "Come out with

the real truth, else you will get an unforgettable thrashing in front of all your voters."

"I am a faithful servant of Allah." Said Nawab Saab boldly. "I am afraid of His *danda*, not yours. You stupid man, fear Him, for I am speaking the truth and nothing but the truth."

Liar!

Someone screamed from the far end. All eyes turned in that direction. Like a mad bull Sher Singh was making his way through the crowd raising the roof. "Nawab Saab is a liar, traitor, informer, swindler, cheater..."

"Huuuh!" Nawab Saab got the shock of his life. He could see stars in daylight. The committee of five was totally confused. Even Pandit Makhanlal and Mullah Ali Wali were baffled.

Sher Singh, the childhood friend of Nawab Rangile and the PRO of NOSE party accusing his own leader!! This was the last nail in the coffin. The sky had fallen. Nawab Saab lost all hope.

When Sher Singh came on the stage, Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* exploded. "Are you in your senses? Do you know whom you are accusing of being an informer?"

"I know I am not speaking about a saint, I am talking about a thug." Carefully he took out three eggs safely kept in his *saafa* and added, "These eggs will confirm it. I have just stolen them from the secret drawer of the crook's cupboard."

Shame... shame!

Once again the crowd became unruly. People began to shower all sorts of abuses on Nawab Rangile. They cursed his family. Even his forefathers were dragged in with chosen insults. Pukar Singh silenced them all and broke open one of the three eggs. Then he read the message aloud so that everyone could hear it clearly.

"My dear Dahadali, last night I have learnt that Mullah Ali Wali is a puppet of America. He is getting bags of dollars as well as bottles of imported liquor from the White House."

Along with the crowd Mullahji too heard that loud and clear. For a few moments he shivered from head to foot and heart to liver. Somehow he controlled his emotions and managed to open his mouth, "That is a white lie!"

The reply came from Sher Singh. He yelled from the stage, "You mean one egg is real while the other one is a fake?"

Mullahji was silenced. Pukar Singh broke open another egg. It contained the following message: My dear Dahadali, Pandit Makhanlal won't stop taking money from Israel. Now he wants arms and ammunition also.

Panditji was shaken so badly that his tongue dived deep into his belly. He could not utter a single word. Now, it was TB's turn. The message in the third egg was about him:

My dear Dahadali, Tayyabali Bohri is a devil in disguise. He wants to contest elections. He needs funds very badly as Zalim Singh, the cotton-mill owner, has shown him the door. If he wins, he promises to gift Nagadapur to you so that it becomes part of Tabla Ganj. I believe the deal is worth a try.

The crowd became wild. Some goondas came onto the stage and carried away TB like a leaf in a cyclone. He was thrashed so thoroughly that he could see his *naani* waiting for him in hell. Had not the SP Bandukilal daringly jumped from the dias into the crowd and rescued him, he would have certainly met his *naani* that day.

Next, it was Nawab Saab's turn to get kicks and punches with love from his voters. For, he was the root cause of all this trouble. Once again, when the goondas dashed for the stage to pull him down, the SP pulled out his gun and warned, "Not a step further!"

The angry crowd froze. Now the SP turned to Pukar Singh, the *mukhia* and his team of five senior citizens, "I smell a rat..."

"... in the egg?" Pukar Singh wondered.

"The four messages, taken out from four different eggs are here before us." The SP had turned into a defense lawyer and was speaking like one. "But all of them are not written by the same hand. I see two types of distinct handwritings. That also proves beyond doubt that Nawab Rangile is not responsible for all of them."

Nawab Saab, who was silently praying to Allah all the time, was some what relieved. He declared, "The fact is, I have not written a single note."

"Then who wrote them?"

"That only TB can answer."

The SP picked up the half dead TB by his collar and made him stand up. He looked like a scarecrow needing support. The SP asked sternly, "Who wrote those messages?" Before he could answer TB collapsed. The SP picked him up again and held him like a puppet.

TB confessed, he had written the first message. He also disclosed that Mullah Ali Wali and Pandit Makhanlal had hatched this plot together to send Nawab Saab to the gallows. But before that they wanted to tarnish his fair image. That was the only way to get rid of him from the elections.

Mullahji and Panditji had already vanished from the scene. If they had been there, the angry crowd would have pounded them mercilessly and made them into non-veg *masala-dosas.*

Now the question was: who wrote the other three messages? Sher Singh, the spin-doctor realised, the time was ripe to come out in the open and state the facts. He turned to the *mukhia* and confessed, "To counter enemy's moves, under my guidance, Begum Rangili had prepared three eggs and I had written the messages."

Now the chaff was separated from the grain. The curtain had risen. The mystery was solved. At last the people of Nagadapur knew who was their genuine leader and who was a fake. Who was patriot and who was a traitor. They were so excited and thrilled that they yelled together:

Save your Nose
From fundamentalist
From terrorist
From politicians
Vote for Nose

On Election Day, as promised, Nawab Saab gave *malai-kulfi* to each and every child, five-star meals to all the *youth* and *rabadi-puri* to senior citizens. The result was, voters thronged the polling booths and voted with gusto. The ultimate result was…

Pandit Makhanlal got two votes. One was his own and the other one was of his wife. Mullah Ali Wali could muster a single vote, that of his own. His wife, Begum Chandni was crackpot and one of the laws of polling says that to vote, all the nuts and bolts of the head must be fixed.

When Dahadali learnt about the landslide victory of Nawab Rangile,

next day he came early in the morning to wish him. With him were a box of Karachi's famous sweet, *sonhalwa* and a garland of hundred roses.

"Nawab Saab," he roared as usual from the court yard. "If the cotton-mill siren has failed to wake you up, may I call again?"

"Have mercy, *miya*." Nawab Saab said as he opened the doors. "Your single roar is good enough to wake up all the dead of the cemetery."

Dahadali garlanded him first and then hugged him thrice as per the tradition. Finally he offered the sweet box.

"Miya, this is too much..."

"This is not an ordinary occasion." He told Nawab Saab proudly. "Your victory is historical. The faithful servant of Allah has road-rolled the opposition."

"Indeed, that was His wish."

"That means you will follow all His orders from above!"

"Of course I have been following them till this day."

"Err..." Dahadali thought for a moment or two.

"Speak out, we have democracy here. Everybody enjoys freedom of speech."

Finally Dahadali came out with the question that was pinching him since long. "When Allah offered you a lakh of rupees, did he not ask for anything in return?"

"No."

"Haven't you received any instruction with the money?"

"Not at all."

The empty sack was still lying under the bed. Dahadali pulled it out and shook it after turning it upside down. An envelope slipped out. "Seems no one noticed it," said Nawab Saab as he picked it up and tore it open. The letter inside read:

From
The Almighty
Cloud no.7,
7th Heaven,
Universe.

O the faithful, when I heard your prayers, my heart melted like butter in the sun and eyes watered like a stream in the moon. For, you are my only loyal believer. I grant your prayers and drop this sack with crisp bank notes of one lakh rupees. Don't forget to read the fine print below.

The Lord of Both the Worlds

Allah Miya

Note:

If you win, it will be your sacred duty to see that Nagadapur goes to Tabla Ganj.

"Now what do you say, my parliamentarian?" Dahadali was all smiles as he asked, "can you ignore Allah's command?"

Nawab Saab started laughing.

"Hey," Dahadali was puzzled. "What is there to laugh about?"

Nawab Saab could not hold himself, so holding his belly he started rolling on the ground saying, "My Allah has a very fine sense of humour."

"Humour? What's so funny?!"

"The Merciful, the Compassionate, the Emperor of emperors is the Lord of the whole universe. What does it matter to him if a tiny village stays on this side of the fence or that?"

And he started laughing again.

Dahadali who had dropped the sack full of money in Nawab Saab's house, felt like banging his own head on the wall till there was no head left.

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